

10/27/21 Wednesday

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US Says Ready to 'Quickly Reach, Implement' Return to JCPOA With Iran in New Round of Vienna Talks

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US State Department said on Wednesday it was prepared to return to Vienna for a seventh round of talks with Iran early next month.

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement the US believes it is still possible to "quickly reach and implement an understanding on return to mutual full compliance" with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as only a small number of outstanding issues remain to be settled from the last round of talks in June.

The seventh round, which is expected to begin early next month, will be the first since Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office in August. A conservative, Raisi has criticized his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, for being too eager to reach a settlement with the Western powers and has ordered a comprehensive review of all aspects of the negotiation process begun in April.

"The new administration is trying to find out what are the shortcomings, what are the characteristics for the previous talks," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed [Khatibzadeh told France 24](#) earlier this month.

The deal initially reached in 2015 between Iran, the US, UK, France, Germany, European Union, Russia and China, and saw Iran accept strict limits on the purity of uranium-235 it could refine and volume it could store in exchange for the removal of sanctions against the Iranian economy. However, in 2018 then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the agreement and accused Iran of secretly violating the deal, reimposing sanctions afterward that crippled Iran's economy and exacerbated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response, Iran began reducing its commitments to the deal, producing steadily higher purities of u-235 and storing greater quantities of the radioactive material, which can in some [very high purities](#) be used to make a nuclear weapon, but which is generally used to fuel nuclear power plants or conduct medical research. Highly enriched uranium can also be used to produce plutonium-239, the most common explosive in a nuclear weapon.

Iran has denied accusations that it is pursuing a nuclear weapon and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, has [issued a fatwa](#) banning the use of all weapons of mass destruction. Israeli intelligence has also [dismissed reports](#) Iran might be close to a nuclear weapon, noting there were no indications of new weapons-level work alongside the new refinement efforts.

Nonetheless, the US and Israel have continued to posture as if time is running out. Last week, the Israeli government approved a special budget of \$1.5 billion to draw up and rehearse [plans for a potential attack](#) on Iran's nuclear facilities, which are heavily guarded and many of which lay deep underground.

America and many of its regional allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, have said they want an even stricter version of the JCPOA than that created in 2015. [Price said last week](#) the US was not "optimistic, not pessimistic," but simply "clear-eyed" about the Vienna talks.

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ASEAN Urged to Recognize Myanmar's Ousted National Unity Government After Snubbing Junta Chief

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) decided to exclude leaders of Myanmar's military government brought to power in a February coup, the bloc is now facing pressure to pick sides in the country's political conflict and recognize a disempowered civilian government.

The 10-nation bloc, joined by a number of other partners including China and the United States, is holding its annual three-day summit virtually from Tuesday until Thursday. In a controversial move just days before the meeting, ASEAN members [voted to disinvite](#) Min Aung Hlaing, the head of Myanmar's Tatmadaw military force who made himself Prime Minister in August after leading a coup against the civilian government.

"Today, ASEAN did not expel Myanmar from ASEAN's framework. Myanmar abandoned its right," Cambodian Prime Minister [Hun Sen said](#). "Now we are in the situation of ASEAN minus one. It is not because of ASEAN, but because of Myanmar."

However, Myanmar wasn't totally excluded, as an invitation was sent to a nonpartisan representative of the government, who declined to attend due to what it would do for the government's image.

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, which presently occupies ASEAN's rotating chair, [said in a Monday](#) statement that Myanmar "needs both time and political space to deal with its many and complex challenges," but added that ASEAN remains "committed to support Myanmar in its efforts to return to normalcy in accordance with the will of the people of Myanmar."

The bloc has never before excluded a country from its summit since its 1967 foundation and generally maintains a policy of non-interference. Myanmar's Foreign Ministry has also said that disinviting Hlaing violates the ASEAN charter, another reason for them to not participate at all. However, they cautioned it also means Myanmar cannot be bound by decisions made in its absence.

At the summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo said that while "it's important for us to honour the principles of non-interference ... we're obligated to uphold other principles ... like democracy, good governance, respect for human rights, and a constitutional government."

However, others have gone beyond simply making the military government feel unwelcome and are pushing ASEAN to recognize the National Unity Government (NUG), a group of lawmakers, ousted in the [February 2021 coup](#), as well as representatives from ethnic groups against the junta. It is led by the National League for Democracy, the party of former state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who was accused by the military of violating COVID-19 safety regulations and

bans on importing certain radio technology and thus voiding the results of the November 2020 elections, which the NLD carried handily.

Charles Santiago, a member of the Malaysian parliament and chairman of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), said in a [Wednesday press conference](#) that “much more needs to be done” by ASEAN to settle the situation in Myanmar, including for ASEAN to “meet officially and publicly with representatives of the duly elected NUG.”

“The [Myanmar] military seems to have shown total contempt of the ASEAN Leaders’ agreement,” he said, referring to [an April agreement](#) between Hlaing and ASEAN to stop the violence, which has claimed more than 1,200 lives and bordered on civil war, and to take necessary steps toward restoring democracy.

When he was appointed head of the caretaker government in August, Hlaing said that elections would be held in 2023.

Bo Hla Tint, NUG’s ambassador to ASEAN, has also called on the bloc to enter dialogue with the shadow civilian government.

“It is very obvious that the 2020 election provided popular support and legitimacy to the NUG government,” Tint said at the presser. “Only NUG has the legitimacy from the people to work with the regional and international community.”

“We will be a very responsible partner in the region. We want to be part of the ASEAN Community in a constructive way,” he added.

Khin Ohmar, head of the pro-democracy group Progressive Voice Myanmar, said that ASEAN’s “indecisiveness” had actually caused further bloodshed in Myanmar, warning that the crisis has already reached a “breaking point with no signs of stopping.”

“Over 250,000 [have] been forced to flee from the junta’s attacks. The junta is also planning a new wave of operations, and this is a form of collective punishment against the people for standing up against their failed coup,” she said. “It should be very clear to ASEAN by now that ASEAN alone cannot tackle the crisis in Myanmar. This crisis has been created by the military, and thus, working with the junta will only bring more harm to the people.”

More than 9,000 people have been arrested since the coup, including activists, journalists, government employees, and medics. The [government released 5,600](#) of them last week in an apparent mass amnesty, but warned if they were re-arrested - as more than 100 were immediately after their release, according to [Human Rights Watch](#) - they would be forced to serve their full sentences, plus whatever new charges were brought against them.

In August, Brunei sent Second Foreign Minister Erywan Yusof to meet with Kyi and other detained civilian leaders, [but was blocked](#) earlier this month by the junta because they face criminal charges.

Kyi appeared [before a court](#) in the capital of Naypyidaw on Tuesday to give testimony in the case against her and other officials, including Win Myint, who was president at the time of the coup. However, the courtroom was closed to the public and a gag order imposed by the government on her legal team has prevented almost any news from getting out about the proceedings.

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'We Strongly Oppose' Israel's Approval of Massive New West Bank Settlement Plan, US Says
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Washington has issued a strong rebuke of a new Israeli plan to build more than 1,300 new settlement homes in the West Bank for Jewish settlers, with thousands more likely to soon be approved. However, behind the scenes, Israeli leaders are denying any new US pressure exists. "We are deeply concerned about the Israeli government's plan to advance thousands of settlement units tomorrow, Wednesday, many of them deep in the West Bank," US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters at a Tuesday briefing.

"We strongly oppose the expansion of settlements, which is completely inconsistent with efforts to lower tensions and to ensure calm, and it damages the prospects for a two-state solution," Price said.

Over the weekend, Israeli Construction and Housing Minister [Zeev Elkin announced](#) approval of 1,355 new settlement homes in seven existing settlements in the West Bank, including Beit El. However, they are just the beginning: another 4,400 homes could soon be on the way. The [BBC reported](#) Wednesday that the Supreme Planning Council of the Civil Administration had given final approval to 1,800 homes to be built in Jewish settlements and preliminary approval to another 1,300.

The planning commission is also [expected to approve](#) 1,300 homes in Palestinian settlements in Area C of the West Bank, or the part of the West Bank under direct military rule - the first substantial construction approval given to Palestinians since 2007.

Roughly 475,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank, who enjoy preferential rights compared to the roughly 2.8 million Palestinians who live there.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet's construction plans are still more grand: earlier this month, he [announced his intent](#) to quadruple the population of the Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War. Israel announced its annexation of the region, which lies east of the River Jordan and the Sea of Galilee, in 1981, which the United Nations denounced as illegal, but which the Trump administration recognized in 2019.

Elkin also said on Israel's Army Radio that he plans to double the size of the Jordan River Valley's population. The fertile area lies almost exclusively within Area C, which Bennett's predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, attempted to annex as well, before Trump intervened with the Abraham Accords peace deal with several Arab states.

Biden's Lethargic Opposition

While Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, was very strongly supportive of Israel's construction plans in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Golan Heights, Biden has taken a stronger stance, although according to some in Bennett's government, it hasn't been nearly as strong as it's presented.

Following reports last week that Bennett was "surprised" by the level of pressure the US was putting on his administration over the settlements, Elkin said on Army Radio that there was "no connection between the report and what happened in reality."

"We know how to behave," he added. "It's not anything we haven't seen in previous governments."

Another similar incident happened in July amid rumors of a “construction freeze” in the aftermath of [another batch](#) of construction project approvals. Price claimed at the time that Washington’s opposition to settlement construction had been “conveyed in public, as I have just now, but also in private.”

“There is no freeze,” David Elhayani, a member of New Hope, told the [Jerusalem Post](#) in response, adding that “if there is a freeze this government would not survive” and rejecting the notion that such pressure had been applied by Biden.

Construction in the West Bank, which Zionists call by the ancient kingdoms of Judea and Samaria, is strongly opposed by two parties in his coalition - Meretz, or the Greens, and Ra’am, the Joint Arab List - and a third member, Labor, opposes construction outside the settlement blocs. However, the fact that such construction plans have been able to go ahead without much dissent suggests that early suspicions [Bennett’s coalition](#), which was initially united almost exclusively by opposition to Netanyahu, might not be as fragile as believed.

Israeli anti-settlement NGO [Peace Now denounced](#) the construction approvals on Sunday as a continuation of “Netanyahu’s policy of de facto annexation” and called on Labor and Meretz to “wake up and demand the wild building in settlements cease immediately.”

Report Reveals Massive Settlement Investments

A report published last month exposed hundreds of European companies that have collectively hidden hundreds of billions of dollars of investment in companies actively involved in Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Published by the Don’t Buy Into Occupation (DBIO) coalition, [the report found](#) that 672 European financial institutions had relationships with 50 businesses that participate in Israel’s settlement economy and that just between 2018 and May of 2021, they had provided \$114 billion in loans and invested another \$141 billion into those businesses.

The offenders are some of Europe’s biggest banks, including Deutsche Bank, Santander, Barclays, and BNP Paribas, as well as firms like Booking.com and HeidelbergCement. The coalition reached out to the businesses on the list to alert them about the connection and Palestinian calls to boycott and divest from companies that do business in what the United Nations calls the “Occupied Territories” of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights. The campaign, called BDS, where the S stands for “sanctioning Israel,” is intended to pressure the government to end what activists call apartheid practices, including settlement in those areas.

“Some of them claim they did their human rights due diligence, but still decided to be involved in a settlement enterprise, which is quite against any of the suggestions or analysis of human rights experts,” Dr. Anna Khdair, a legal researcher at Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights organization, and one of the report’s co-drafters, [told MintPress News](#).

However, she said that many simply did not care about objections to their investments because the settlements are legal under Israeli law.

“So, we still have a lot of work to do to explain how the settlement enterprise actually works and how much it is connected to the Israeli economy, [while] Israel itself will not provide enough information or transparency about those links with the illegal settlement enterprise,” Khdair added.

Last year, the UN Human Rights Council [published a similar list](#) of 112 businesses with ties to illegal Israeli settlements, most of which are domiciled in Israel.

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Manchin Denounces Billionaire Tax Proposal Aimed at Funding Democrats' Spending Package
By - Adriana Montes

Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) denounced a new tax proposal on Wednesday that would target billionaires and those who earned \$100 million or more in three consecutive years aimed to help fund Biden's economic plan, calling it a divisive billionaires tax.

Senate Democrats [reportedly](#) unveiled the idea for this new tax on billionaires Wednesday morning to help pay for President Joe Biden's social services and climate change — sponsored by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyde (D-OR), according to The Hill.

"I don't like it. I don't like the connotation that we're targeting different people," Manchin [told reporters](#) when asked about the new tax proposal.

Manchin argued that the wealthy "have contributed to society, create a lot of jobs... and give a lot to philanthropic pursuits."

"It's time that we all pull together and row together," he added.

If enacted, the [107-page bill](#) sponsored by Wyden would close loopholes that allow wealthy investors and corporations to use partnerships to avoid paying taxes. Additionally, billionaires would be taxed on unrealized capital gains on their liquid assets — including stock, bonds and cash.

Wyden said Wednesday after Manchin's comments that talks on the tax proposal will continue.

"Sen. Manchin has always supported the principle that the very, very wealthy should pay their fair share. So we're going to talk," Wyden said.

The proposed tax is expected to face court challenges, as it has already faced resistance from some House Democrats who worry that it could be vulnerable to legal and constitutional challenges.

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Texas House Launches Probe Into School Library Books' on Race and Sexuality
By - Adriana Montes

A Texas lawmaker has launched an investigation into Texas school libraries' books on issues of race and sexuality following a measure passed by the legislature earlier this year that prohibited teachers from teaching critical race theory at public schools.

Acting as the Chairman of the Texas House Committee on General Investigating, Rep. Matt Krause (R-Fort Worth) asked school leaders to identify where copies of specific books were located in library shelves and classrooms, and the amount of funds spent by districts to acquire

the books, according to an October 25 [letter](#) directed at the Texas Education Agency obtained by the Texas Tribune.

Kraus also asked districts to provide information about specific books that deal with race, sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, or any material that “might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” due to their race or sex. The Republican lawmaker informed districts they must also provide information on any other book that violates [House Bill 3979](#), a “critical race theory law” designed to control and prohibit the instruction and discussions about certain concepts related to race, sex, and diversity in public schools.

A [16-page list](#) of books published from 1969 to 2021 was attached Krause’s letter, amongst the books included were “Beyond the Gender Binary” by Alok Vaid-Menon, that challenges the world to see gender with full acceptance, to last year’s book club favorite, “Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot” by Mikki Kendall.

The letter went to school districts without a vote from the full committee on investigations, with several districts already beginning to compile the information requested by Kraus.

“At a time when schools are focused on keeping students and employees safe in the midst of a global pandemic and addressing the learning gaps that developed over the last two years, this sort of empty political grandstanding, which will divert time and energy away from the real work, is incredibly frustrating,” Kyle DeBeer, Waco Independent School District chief of staff, said in a [statement](#) to the Tribune-Herald.

In a [statement](#) obtained by The Hill, the Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) called the letter a “political overreach” and a “witch hunt.”

“This is an obvious attack on diversity and an attempt to score political points at the expense of our children’s education,” TSTA President Ovidia Molina said. “What will Rep. Krause propose next? Burning books he and a handful of parents find objectionable?”

Krause did not provide a specific reason in the letter as to why this investigation was taking place, only that “the committee may initiate inquiries concerning any ‘matter the committee considers necessary for the information of the legislature or for the welfare and protection of state citizens.’”

School officials have until November 12 to respond.

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Stoneo or Oreo?: US Parents Warned of THC-Laced Halloween Candy

By - Adriana Montes

Inspect your children’s candy! Parents are advised to look out for symptoms of THC overdose that may include respiratory distress, loss of coordination, and loss of consciousness.

As Halloween approaches, attorney generals from Connecticut and Ohio are issuing a warning about cannabis products packaged to look like major snack brands, alerting parents to inspect their children’s Halloween candy and packaging.

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost warned of “unregulated, illegal marijuana snacks” and candies that come in packaging designed to look similar to genuine brands in a [press release](#) Tuesday.

"The levels of THC in these fakes could have some real and devastating consequences for children," Yost said. "Parents need to be extra cautious, especially around Halloween, that these copycat products don't wind up in treat bags."

The release included several pictured [examples](#) of some of these products - including Oreo, Sour Patch Kids and Cheeto snack packages - which were confiscated by law enforcement. Overdose incidents involving ingestion of edible cannabis foods among children have been on the rise. So far, 80 percent of calls related to marijuana edibles to the Poison Control Center during the first half of 2020 were [reported](#) for pediatric exposure, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

"Accidental cannabis overdoses by children are increasing nationwide, and these products will only make this worse. While Connecticut recently legalized adult-use cannabis, many of these products fall far outside the range of what will ever be safe or authorized for sale. If you see these look-alike products for sale, please report them to my office and take every measure to keep these away from kids," said Connecticut Attorney General William Tong.

The release provided helpful guidance to parents encouraging them to speak with their children, including young adults, to provide age-appropriate guidance about the "dangers look-alike products pose."

Consumers who encounter look-alike cannabis edible products are encouraged to file a consumer complaint with the attorney general's COVID-19 Cases Continue to Decline in

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COVID-19 Cases Continue to Decline in Florida as Immunity Increases

By - Adriana Montes

Since mid-September, the positivity rate for new cases declined to 4.8% after hitting a peak of 19.8% the week of Aug. 13-19.

The death toll and number of COVID-19 cases continue to drop across Florida despite DeSantis insisting the state would not shut down and refusing to implement mask or vaccine mandates — focusing efforts on early treatment.

[Data](#) released by the State Department of Health on Friday show 25,792 new cases of COVID-19 for the week ending Thursday — the lowest number reported since mid-July.

"We're down about 75% from where we returned six weeks ago," said prominent USF Health Professor Dr. Thomas Unnash in a [statement](#) reported by Florida News Times. "We are now beginning to reach a point where a sufficient number of people have been vaccinated or naturally infected and are approaching the mythical herd immunity point we wanted," Dr. Unnasch said in reference to the number of cases decreasing

Experts predict that the rates will rise again as the winter approaches, but, as of now, it seems like Florida's downward trends will only continue.

"I think what we are likely to see is actually we're gonna see some more outbreaks, but they're not gonna be big waves like we've seen before. These are gonna be like spot fires," added Dr. Unnasch.

office that pertains to their state.

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Texas AG Paxton Files Amicus Brief for Facebook's 'Vague and Inaccurate' Interpretation of Law
By - Adriana Montes

Attorney General Ken Paxton has filed an amicus brief in the Texas Supreme Court in the wake of Facebook's "vague and inaccurate" interpretation of Section 230 that's being used to shield it from liability and protect social media giants.

The legal interpretation of [Section 230](#) of the Communications Decency Act has become a key moderation in the larger debate shielding online intermediaries from liability for speech that they host or republish. It is known to protect Big Tech companies and service providers, including social media sites that publish third-party content, from liability "for human trafficking that was facilitated using the social media platform".

In the [brief](#), Paxton accuses Facebook of taking advantage of this vulnerable demographic in exchange for advertising compensation, that leaves victims of sex trafficking without effective relief or financial remedy from website operators.

"Facebook's wrongful interpretation of Section 230 is being used to protect social media giants, while Americans are being silenced. A disturbing increase in heinous crimes such as human trafficking and illegal activity have eroded the fabric of our great nation", Attorney General Paxton said in a [statement](#).

"I will fight to uphold the rule of law and hold internet platforms like Facebook accountable".

The petitioner alleges that she was trafficked through the use of Facebook's online platform, and that "Facebook failed to warn her of the dangers of human trafficking because its business model depends on maximising contacts between users—including contacts with minors".

Facebook asserted that it was completely immune from the petitioner's suit under Section 230(c)(1) of the Communications Decency Act (CDA), relieving the platform from any liability.

In response, Texas claimed that courts have improperly interpreted additional immunity, further suggesting that Section 230 should be amended for better clarification that online platforms,

such as Facebook, are not immunised for their own alleged wrongdoing and are [held accountable](#) in an effort to protect Americans from "exploitation, illegal activity, and violence".

Taking into account that "without the third-party content produced by the traffickers, [the] Petitioner would not have sustained the injuries she alleges".

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Kremlin Says No Decisions Made on Mandatory Vaccination Against COVID-19 in Russia
MOSCOW, October 28 (Sputnik) - Russian authorities have not yet decided to introduce mandatory vaccination of the population against COVID-19, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

"So far, no decisions have been made on this matter. We are watching how the situation is developing. You see the figures, they change every day. The figures, especially the one from

today, are not yet a cause for optimism, so we are watching," Peskov told journalists when asked about the possibility of mandatory vaccinations in Russia.

He denied reports that the government is eyeing a restart to the campaign to encourage people to get vaccinated, arguing that the current campaign is still underway.

"This information is not true. There is no restart, this information is completely incorrect. An information campaign is like riding a bike. Especially when it comes to vaccination, especially taking into account the specific approach of compatriots to the topic of vaccination. This is a constant campaign that should be conducted and is conducted on an ongoing basis in different segments, in traditional and new media. There is no restart and cannot be," Peskov said.

He also noted that the rate of vaccination against COVID-19 in Russia significantly accelerated.

"I want to hope that this trend will not weaken with the end of the non-working days," the spokesman added.

According to Peskov, the Russian authorities are conducting a campaign to stimulate the vaccination, but until the necessary indicators are reached, the government will not be satisfied with its results.

On Thursday, Russia registered a new single-day record of 40,096 COVID-19 cases, up from 36,582 the day before, bringing the cumulative total to 8,392,697.

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Poland Seeking French Cooperation in Construction of Nuclear Power Plant – Warsaw

WARSAW, October 27 (Sputnik) – Poland wants to build a nuclear power plant with France, Pawel Soloch, the head of the Polish National Security Bureau, said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, Polish President Andrzej Duda began an official visit to Paris, where he held talks with his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron.

"We have made a declaration of readiness to consider the French proposal. We are talking about cooperation with France in the implementation of the Polish project for the construction of a nuclear power plant," Soloch told reporters.

Warsaw takes Paris' proposals very seriously, given that they are discussed on such a high level, he noted, adding that Poland has an agreement on cooperation in the field with the United States, which is currently under implementation.

Washington and Warsaw signed a deal to cooperate on the development of the Polish civil nuclear power program in October 2020. Poland aims to build six nuclear power units of 6-9 gigawatts capacity, with the first of them planned to be put in operation in the Gdansk seaside area in 2033.

To date, most of Poland's energy capacity is coal-fired.

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Renewable Energy Unlikely to Replace Fossil Fuels Even in Long-Term – Rosneft CEO

VERONA, Italy, October 27 (Sputnik) – Even in the long term, renewable sources of energy will not be able to fully substitute hydrocarbon fuels, and the commitment to the first is not supported by reliable technologies, Russian oil company Rosneft CEO, Igor Sechin, said on Thursday.

"The faith in the limitless power of renewable energy is not yet backed by reliable technologies... Even in the long run, renewable energy will not be able to replace conventional energy sources," Sechin said at the Eurasian Economic Forum in Verona, Italy.

He went on to say that serious technological breakthroughs are vital for the energy transition. The research into and search for new less energy-intensive and toxic materials are also needed for energy generation and storage. Developing new materials, according to Sechin, is no longer an energy issue, but a question of a change in the structure of the economy.

The Rosneft CEO noted that carbon neutrality that the world seeks to reach by 2050 will not prevent climate change.

"It is necessary now to make decisions about the actions beyond 2050 and prepare for more large-scale changes linked to the energy transition," Sechin said.

The energy transition, for its part, must be based on real economic patterns, but not on the claims of eco-activists.

"The energy transition must be based not on the requirements of climate activists, but on real economic regulations to ensure income on investments and a long-term value growth simultaneously meeting the demand for energy sources and decrease in emissions," Sechin said.

Sechin's comments come on the cusp of the COP26 climate conference, set to launch October 31 in Glasgow, Scotland, where nations are expected to renew their commitments on carbon neutrality and set out targets to avert the worst effects of climate change.

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UK Investigating Detention of Its Fishing Vessel by France –London

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) – The UK government is probing the incident with a British vessel detained in France over lack of a fishing license, Environment Secretary George Eustice said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the French Sea Ministry said that the British boat was caught fishing in its waters and subsequently escorted to the French port city Le Havre after the maritime patrol had discovered that it had no relevant license.

"My officials are investigating the circumstances around this vessel that is being detained in France. It is too early to be able to identify precisely what happened but I have seen reports that it was on the list originally and then appeared not to be on the list but it is something I have asked our officials to urgently investigate," Eustice told the parliament.

The second UK vessel caught in the French waters earlier in the day was fined for non-compliance with orders of the maritime patrol team.

On Wednesday, France said that it will impose sanctions against the United Kingdom on November 2 over its refusal to issue enough fishing licenses for French fishermen to access British waters under the Brexit trade deal. London slammed the announcement.

In late September, the UK Ministry of the Environment reported that 1,700 vessels from the EU received licenses to fish in the UK waters, of which 117 were issued to vessels from the EU for fishing in a zone of 6-12 nautical miles. The ministry issued only 12 licenses to French fishermen, having considered 47 applications.

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UAE Expects to Send New Astronaut to Space in Two Years - Emirati Space Center

DUBAI, October 27 (Sputnik) - The United Arab Emirates expects to send another astronaut into orbit in a few years after completing training with NASA, but not necessarily on the US spacecraft, the Assistant Director General for Scientific and Technical Affairs at Mohammed bin Rashid Space Center, Salem Al Marri, told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We trained two of our astronauts [Hazzaa Al Mansoori and Sultan Al Neyadi] in Russia and one of them went for a short duration mission. Now we also train our astronauts in NASA, the same ones and the next two that we selected. And we are looking for options of flights," Al Marri said on the sidelines of the 72nd International Aeronautical Congress in Dubai.

The UAE selected its first two astronauts, Al Mansoori and Al Neyadi, in 2018. In the fall of 2019, Al Mansoori flew to the International Space Station on the Russian Soyuz MS-15 spacecraft.

Al Marri said that the UAE has "selected two astronauts, Mohammad and Nora [Mohammad Al Mulla and Nora Al Matrooshi] ... They are now training in Dubai and they will go in December to the US, where they will join candidate class with NASA for two years," adding that it does not necessarily mean that the astronauts will go to space with NASA, since the country has not currently confirmed its participation in any manned missions.

In response to a question about the prospects for the UAE's first female astronaut going to space, Al Marri said that "we base on merit, not on gender, age or anything like that... If she succeeds in her training and is strong, she will fly very soon. And I think she has very strong capabilities."

The assistant director at the UAE's space center added that his country was "working very closely with Russia" on many projects, including a joint isolation experiment on a spacecraft stimulation, which will start on November 4 and will last 8 months.

In August, the UAE unveiled the names of its two new astronauts, Al Mulla and Al Matrooshi, with Al Matrooshi being the country's first female astronaut.

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UNICEF Warns of Cholera Resurgence in Haiti if Water Hygiene, Sanitation Neglected

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Haiti may face a resurgence of waterborne diseases, such as cholera, if water hygiene and sanitation continue to be ignored, especially given infrastructure damage from the recent massive earthquake, UNICEF Haiti's Chief of Communications Ndiaga Seck told Sputnik.

"Water hygiene and sanitation is a problem in Haiti. As you know, UNICEF has been fighting along with the Minister of Health here in Haiti, the cholera that started in 2010 here. We are very likely to win this battle because since February 2019, we haven't got any case of cholera," Seck said. "Now, if we neglect water hygiene and sanitation, waterborne diseases, such as cholera, can surge again and that will be another issue to solve."

In the area of the deadly August earthquake alone, around 1,800 defects in the sanitation system have been identified.

Another big issue is hospitals which have been damaged or destroyed and they need repair or rebuilding.

Haiti was rocked by a devastating earthquake in August, which killed over 2,000 people and caused signification damage. In addition, the country is suffering from poverty, gang violence, and a political crisis exacerbated by the assassination of President Jovenel Moise last July.

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UNICEF Expects More Haitian Migrants Sent Back Home This Week - Official

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund expects more Haitian migrants to be turned back home by neighboring countries this week, UNICEF Haiti's Chief of Communications Ndiaga Seck told Sputnik.

"Now, when it comes to migrants, we have received in Haiti more than 10,000 migrants in the recent weeks - from September 19 to now - coming from of course, all the countries, including the USA, but also Mexico, Brazil and other countries," Seck said. "We expect to receive more refugees this particular week. Some refugees were supposed to arrive, of course, last Tuesday. They are supposed to be arriving."

Once migrants arrive at the airport - because they often come on planes - UNICEF tries to provide some support to them immediately at the scene, according to Seck.

"UNICEF has set up a kind of child corner at the airport - because we are more [involved with] the women and the children and other partners take care of adults - UNICEF has opened that child care support with one of their partners," he said. "Then, we help children get some sort of normality once they arrive, help them understand what's happening. And then after that, monitoring will be developed to reach them in places where they are to help them."

Haiti is engulfed in economic and political crises, with thousands of people attempting to flee the country in search of a better life.

In July, the country was rocked by the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, which led to a rise in gang violence. In August, a devastating earthquake ripped through the nation, killing over 2,000 people and causing significant damage.

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UNICEF Received \$9.3Mln in Emergency Funds for Haiti Out of \$73Mln Sought - Official

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has only received \$9.3 million out of \$73.3 million in emergency funds for Haiti that is part of a larger \$122.2 million request to meet the humanitarian needs of Haitians, UNICEF Chief of Communications in Haiti Ndiaga Seck told Sputnik.

"Actually, we need funding to respond. After the earthquake, for instance, we launched it in a particular HAC, which was a humanitarian action for children. We definitely wanted an additional \$73.3 million out of the \$122 million that we asked before," Seck said. "So far, of the \$73.3 million, we've received \$ 9.3 million."

Seck said the amount of money UNICEF received is very low compared to all the different requests made to reconstruct, repair or build schools or repair or build hospitals.

UNICEF is the only United Nations agency that is providing potable and drinking water to the population in Haiti, he noted.

"We are working with the government. We're working with DINEPA, which is the national agency for portable water. In the area of the earthquake alone, we identified 1800 defects in the system to be repaired. So all of those are huge demand that UNICEF is addressing right now," Seck said.

The UNICEF official also said the funding is needed quickly to help assist Haitians recover from the recent devastating earthquake in August but also help children against malnutrition as well as provide healthcare aid.

"We also need funding for many children have problems nowadays, after the earthquake, they need to be reunified with their families. They need psychosocial support," he said.

Seck pointed out that UNICEF has 110 people working in Haiti and noted that the personnel do not face challenges in carrying out their jobs other than the issue of insecurity, which is the main problem for UNICEF staff as well as for other agencies and for the population of Haiti.

"Security is one of the difficulties that we have. But once it's solved, the UNICEF people are on the ground and working around the clock day and night to get these people what they need," he said.

More than 2,000 people died in the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti in August and also caused significant material damage. The natural disaster added to the long-term burden of poverty, gang violence and political crises following the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July.

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Haiti Enters State of Chaos Amid Gang-Related Violence, Kidnappings - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Haiti is currently in a state of chaos as a result of the level of gang-related violence and numerous kidnappings, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Chief of Communications in Haiti, Ndiaga Seck, told Sputnik.

Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake in August in which more than 2,000 people died. The humanitarian crisis with respect to the earthquake compounded the existing burden of poverty, rampant gang violence and a political crisis following the assassination of previous President Jovenel Moise in July.

When asked about the current humanitarian situation in the country following the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, Seck said, "Actually, in Haiti now, the humanitarian situation is chaos."

Seck said even before Moise's assassination, UNICEF knew at the beginning of the year that gang-related violence started growing in Haiti - especially in and around the capital Port-au-Prince - and 19,000 people have fled their homes as a result.

"Among them, we have 15,000 women and children," Seck said. "Apart from that, now we come into some sort of chaos again when it comes to kidnappings, because UNICEF has identified at least 100 women and children who have been kidnapped from January to August alone."

Seck noted that the number of kidnapped women and children this year has surpassed the number of people who have been kidnapped in 2020.

"We are in a situation where... about 800 people have been kidnapped. Some nongovernmental organizations have the [exact] figure," he said. "You can be kidnapped on your way to school, on your way to the hospital, in church, at home, etc. It's a very bad situation."

Seck also said that the humanitarian situation has been further exacerbated by the recent earthquake that killed some 2,700 people and injured about 12,200, causing widespread material damage, including 130,000 homes being destroyed or damaged as well as more than 1,000 schools and 90 health facilities.

"We are trying our best to first have some temporary learning spaces set up for children to go back to school normally," he said. "We are also supporting the government in terms of supplies, emergency supplies to get those health facilities running again."

In addition, Seck said efforts by groups providing humanitarian assistance amid the crisis in Haiti have further been challenged by the current fuel shortages.

HAITI REMAINS AT STANDSTILL OVER INSECURITY

Haiti has recently seen mass strikes in protest against violence, which has been on the rise since the assassination of Moise. The strikes were prompted by the kidnapping of missionaries in mid-October and the assassination of a pastor in the center of the capital.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the kidnapping of missionaries - 16 Americans and one Canadian - was indicative of a larger problem, calling the current security situation in Haiti unsustainable, as gangs dominate large parts of the country and national police at a loss to stop them.

Seck said the underlying reason for the current economic and social shutdown in Haiti is a deep insecurity crisis, with protests being just a manifestation of it.

"The protest is a given because those people deem [it] necessary to protest to get security back," Seck said.

And although the general protest brought the country to a standstill and has been a hindrance, Seck added, the insecurity does not allow them to work anyway.

"Even without the protest activities these past days, what we wanted to do as humanitarian operations, we couldn't do them because of the insecurity prevailing," Seck said.

HAITI IN DISTRESS AMID FUEL SHORTAGES PROMPTED BY LACK OF SECURITY

Seck described the present conditions in Haiti as being in distress as a result of fuel shortages caused by insecurity in the country that particularly endangers the lives of women and children.

"Fuel shortages have impacted almost every aspect of life in Haiti, be it business or institution or whatever. The fuel shortages are really a problem... It's a situation in which we are really in distress," Seck said.

Seck said there is fuel in the terminals in Haiti but it does not get to be delivered where it is most needed such as in medical institutions.

"We're waiting for this situation to get better and then get the fuel to the hospitals. In the meantime, we fear for the lives of women and children," he said.

The drivers, Seck added, are not ready to take the fuel to hospitals given the lack of security and at least 300 children and 45 women as well as 150 COVID-19 patients are at risk of dying if the solutions are not found quickly.

Seck noted that UNICEF has made a contract with a local provider to bring 10,000 gallons of fuel to four major hospitals in Port-au-Prince. The provider said he could not do so in the rest of the country, but later said he cannot even try Port-au-Prince anymore, Seck added.

"So, this fuel is with the local provider. We paid for it. We know that he can't be delivering it because of the insecurity, so [the fuel] is sitting right there," he said.

Seck said resolving the situation does not necessarily depend on UNICEF given that it is a humanitarian organization, but the organization is trying its best to seek the government and other influencers to help solve the security problem.

"It's not only impacting, as I said, hospitals, it's also impacting the lives of people. Even if today you had your car, you can't buy fuel to go anywhere," he said. "People, because of insecurity, cannot even let their children go to school. So it's really a big problem."

Seck said when UNICEF tried to deliver emergency aid in the southwest of Haiti after the recent devastating earthquake, some truck drivers were unable to go through certain places and would return fully loaded.

"We pay more money to get emergency supplies to the south. And we also lose a lot of time," he said. "The delivery time has lengthened and is happening when people who were injured in the earthquake are waiting for medical care, people who lost their homes wait for support like shelter or hygiene kits or school material, etc. And all of that can't be brought there because of the prevailing insecurity."

Seck said they are working with the Minister of Health but what they really need is "security to get back to normal."

"Maybe there is a possibility for the government to help. There is a possibility for the gangs to understand that this is a serious issue and open humanitarian access," Seck said. "But all

UNICEF is saying is we need open access without restrictions to basic social services. Everybody should get access to those services without any kind of bottlenecks."

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RPT - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator Predicts US Gas Prices May Remain High for 'Couple of Years'

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US consumers should expect gasoline prices to remain high for the next couple of years as the energy industry strives to make up for substantial losses sustained amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, former Texas oil regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

"If we maintain the current political environment which is keeping people, investors especially and institutions, retirement funds and those sort of things, if those people continue to be hesitant to spend money or to loan money or to invest money in oil, then we're going to see high prices for a long time, maybe for a couple of years," Sitton said.

Gasoline prices could start to decline in the latter part of next year if the Biden administration pulls back on its efforts to cut emissions in the United States and to persuade other countries to do the same, Sitton said.

"You're already seeing this a little bit... I think they [Biden administration] realized they created a problem and that they have somehow caused this," Sitton said. "I think between their language softening and prices coming up, I think what is going to happen is investors are probably going to get a little more confident. It will be easier for private equity groups and investor organizations to raise money at that point. Once you see drilling activity pick up at a faster rate, then prices will come back down."

President Joe Biden aims to trim carbon emissions and set the United States on a path to have a carbon neutral economy by 2050.

However, Sitton said any re-election hopes Biden has could be damaged if his supporters end up paying high gasoline prices across the country over the next two years.

Last week, Biden said during a town hall meeting that he expects gas prices to come down sometime next year. He also pointed out tapping into the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve would have a minimal effect.

Sitton agrees that pouring oil from the US strategic oil reserve into the market would not lower gasoline prices because much more change is needed across the board to create a long-term impact.

"Simply releasing a little oil from the strategic oil reserve may do a little bit, but certainly not very much," Sitton said. "It would have a minor impact today."

The oil price is not set by the amount of oil production, Sitton said, it's set by refineries purchasing 12-month oil contracts that are driven by the supply and demand ratios they are anticipating.

"More oil could be in the market in three months, but if you say you want a lot more oil, well then you need a lot of companies doing this activity and once again that costs a lot of money and because oil prices were so low during covid and because of all this investment pull back, there

isn't a lot of money available," Sitton said. "We may have to wait for prices to be high for a while before the companies have enough money to go drill."

One of the issues Biden is also facing, he added, is Iranian oil production is a flexible amount that is hard to predict because of pending sanctions and the tensions between the US and Tehran. Hence, Biden is trying to balance geopolitics as well, Sitton said.

"He [Biden] wants to look strong but it's hard to look strong if you're begging other countries to produce more oil and at the same time not look like you want them to produce more oil because you're trying to maintain your green philosophy," Sitton said. "He's walking a difficult tight rope and I think he's struggling to stay on it."

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), he added, may be refusing to increase oil production as a means to make up for drastic losses caused by the pandemic and to provide capital to develop oil reserves.

"Over the last couple of years where the oil business saw its most tumultuous price environment and you can see that they have weathered the storm of COVID and government pressures and ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] pressures and I don't think they're inclined to try to lower prices without a good reason to do so," Sitton said.

Nearly two years since the start of the pandemic, pent-up demand has created an oil supply crisis which has sent crude prices skyrocketing from below \$49 per barrel at the end of last year to above \$80 at present.

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RPT - Some 1,600 Asylum-Seeking Migrants in US-Bound Caravan in Mexico - UN Refugee Agency

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - About 1,600 asylum-seeking migrants are in a caravan that is currently in the early portion of a nearly 2,000-mile journey to the US border with Mexico, the United Nations Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) spokesperson Sibylla Brodzinsky told Sputnik. "Our estimates are of about 1,600 people," Brodzinsky said on Wednesday regarding the size of the migrant caravan. "Our understanding is that the principal purpose is to draw attention to delays in access to immigration documentation, as well as access to the asylum procedure - by this I mean delays in Mexico."

US media reported that the migrant caravan may be trying to reach the US border before the Trump-era Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program is reinstated in mid-November. The MPP would require migrants to wait in Mexico while they wait for their asylum proceedings to process in the United States.

On Wednesday, the migrant caravan was near the Mexican town of Huixtla in the south of the country near the border with Guatemala.

Texas Department of Public Safety Press Secretary Ericka Miller told Sputnik they are monitoring the situation as it unfolds in order to make real-time decisions and will adjust operations as necessary.

Earlier this month, a US Customs and Border Protection spokesperson said the agency prepares for all possible situations based on movements of migrants and is ready to address any potential increase in migrant encounters.

Mexico's National Institute of Migration did not respond to Sputnik's request for comment.

A record 1.7 million illegal migrants were apprehended on the US southern border in fiscal year 2021, which is recorded from October to September.

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RPT - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator Says Nord Stream 2 Could Help Alleviate Energy Crisis in Europe

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Former Texas oil regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik that Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline may help alleviate the energy crisis in Europe, but fully resolving the problem would take a dramatic shift in investment strategy in oil and gas developments in the region.

"Individually, they do create additional market access, I think it will help, but in the end it's still overall a supply and demand problem," Sitton said regarding Nord Stream 2. "I don't know that any one pipeline or any one new facility is going to be able to swing that. You'll have to see sort of a shift in total investment strategy."

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was completed on September 10 and will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12 EU Gas Directive.

The peak price of gas futures in Europe reached \$1,937 per 1,000 cubic meters on October 6 and thereafter began to fall, but has recently remained steady at \$1,000.

Sitton, a former commissioner with the Texas Railroad Commission, pointed out that Europe may arguably be in worse shape than the United States because their oil and gas operations have been tied up with a lack of investments in refineries or gas infrastructure.

"They [Europeans] buy a ton of natural gas from Russia... The Russians, you look at Gazprom and the Russian oil companies, these companies are probably making more money than any other companies in the world," Sitton said. "They literally are making more money than Amazon, than Walmart, than Apple, because they are selling their oil and gas to Europe at such a premium price."

Global energy use has been impacted by efforts to cut carbon emissions. The Biden administration has said it aims to have a carbon neutral US economy by 2050 and many other nations have pledged to take similar steps in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.

Nearly two years since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, pent-up demand due to governments' measures has created an oil supply crisis which has sent crude prices skyrocketing from below \$49 per barrel at the end of last year to above \$80 at present.

Sitton said he thinks the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) refuses to increase oil production as a means to ease pandemic-induced inflation because they want to provide capital to develop oil reserves.

"They have been fairly consistent in this idea that \$70 to \$80 a barrel oil is a good market price... they feel like that's a price that around the world most people are willing to pay," Sitton added.

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EVENTS TO FOLLOW ON OCTOBER 27

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik)

PUTIN TO ATTEND RUSSIA-ASEAN SUMMIT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Russian President Vladimir Putin will take part in the Russia-ASEAN Summit via videoconference.

The meeting will be held in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of relations between Russia and the ASEAN. The leaders plan to take stock of collaboration between Russia and ASEAN countries, discuss further development of cooperation in the political, economic and humanitarian areas, as well as developments in the Asia-Pacific region.

ROSCOSMOS TO LAUNCH PROGRESS MS-18 CARGO SPACECRAFT TO ISS

Roskosmos will launch Progress MS-18 cargo spacecraft to the International Space Station from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. The spacecraft is expected to dock at the Zvezda Service Module and stay in orbit for 215 days.

The launch of Progress MS-18 will be broadcast live online.

VERONA TO HOST XIV EURASIAN ECONOMIC FORUM

The Italian city of Verona will host the 14th Eurasian Economic Forum from October 28–29. The meeting is scheduled to discuss a wide range of issues related to economics and finance, healthcare, ecology, and energy and technological innovation.

GOVERNING COUNCIL OF ECB TO HOLD MEETING IN FRANKFURT

The Governing Council of the European Central Bank will hold a monetary policy meeting in Frankfurt.

JORDANIAN KING ABDULLAH II TO MEET WITH BORIS JOHNSON IN LONDON

Jordanian King Abdullah II is expected to meet with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in London.

ESTONIAN PRESIDENT TO PAY FIRST VISIT TO POLAND

Estonia's newly elected president, Alar Karis, is expected to travel to Poland and visit Warsaw for the first time since taking the office this month.

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RPT - Biden Green Policies, Anti-Oil Push Hurt Investment Opportunities - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's renewable energy initiative and the green political movement created an environment that discourages investments in the oil and gas industry, former Texas oil regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

"Absolutely, I think that's arguably one of the biggest problems that the industry is facing today," Sitton said regarding Biden's climate policies and the green trade. "Certainly in the last 12 months, the amount of capital investments in oil and gas developments has dropped dramatically from where it was over the last ten years and that's due a lot in part of the fact that investors are listening to politicians who are saying that we are going to go away from oil and we're going to try to give tax and other subsidies to non-hydro carbon energy sources."

The Biden administration's climate policies aim to steer the United States on a course towards developing a carbon neutral economy by 2050. Many other nations have pledged to take similar steps in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.

Sitton said the fact the oil and gas industry is losing investors' dollars to green energy companies is another factor in the supply crisis.

"So you combine that with the political posturing and the investment changes that have followed, there is simply not enough oil in the world today to provide for all of the demand," Sitton said.

He also said some oil and gas companies that want to extract more oil around the world are having trouble finding a bank to finance their projects.

"There are some banks, especially European banks, who have stopped loaning to oil and gas companies," Sitton said. "So another problem is if you lower prices today and reduce the amount of cash that oil companies have, it will mean there will be less oil in the future because there's less money available to drill with."

About 80 percent of the world's energy, Sitton noted, still comes from hydrocarbon.

The former Texas oil regulator believes the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) refuses to increase oil production as a means to make up for drastic losses caused by the pandemic and to provide capital to develop oil reserves.

"Over the last couple of years where the oil business saw its most tumultuous price environment and you can see that they have weathered the storm of COVID and government pressures and ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] pressures and I don't think they're inclined to try to lower prices without a good reason to do so," Sitton said.

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Mexico's National Institute of Migration did not respond to Sputnik's request for comment.

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Blinken Asks Sudanese Counterpart What US Can Do to Back Civilian Gov't - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a telephone call with his Sudanese counterpart asked what action the United States can take to support the transition to a civilian-led government following the military takeover by Sudanese armed forces, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Sudanese Foreign Minister Mariam al-Mahdi to solicit her views about what steps the United States can take to support the Sudanese people in their call for a civilian-led transition to democracy in accordance with the Sudanese Constitutional Declaration," Price said in the release on Wednesday.

Blinken also had a telephone call on Wednesday with African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat to discuss the AU's decision to suspend Sudan. Blinken and the AU chief agreed that Sudan must return to a civilian-led government in accordance with the 2019 Constitutional Declaration.

The Sudanese military detained Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who has now been released, and several other cabinet ministers on Monday, prompting hundreds of people to take to the streets of Khartoum to protest the military takeover.

The head of Sudan's Sovereign Council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, then declared a state of emergency and dissolved the council and government.

The coup came as the military was scheduled to hand leadership of the transitional council over to civilians.

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US, South Korea Agree to Continue Cooperation on Nonproliferation, Space - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US and South Korean diplomats met on Tuesday to discuss disarmament and nonproliferation of nuclear and biological weapons as well as next steps to strengthen cooperation on emerging security challenges, including those in space, the State Department said.

"Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins and ROK Deputy Foreign Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs Ham Sang-wook held a High-Level Bilateral Disarmament and Nonproliferation Consultation in Washington, DC on October 26," the State Department said in a press release on Wednesday. "Both sides... agreed to continue working closely not only on traditional issues such as the nonproliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons but also on emerging security issues, including space."

The officials agreed to continue reinforcing the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) during the upcoming 10th NPT Review Conference scheduled for January, the release said.

The Biden administration and the South Korea government have worked on trying to prevent North Korea from acquiring additional nuclear weapons and protested all nuclear and ballistic missile launches conducted by Pyongyang, the release added.

In May, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said that South Korea's and the United States' most urgent task remains the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

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Biden Admin. Bars Immigration Arrests at Schools, Hospitals, Places of Worship - Memo

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas issued a memorandum barring US immigration enforcement to do arrests in so-called protected areas such as schools, hospitals and places of worship in the United States.

"This memorandum provides guidance for ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] and CBP [Customs and Border Protection] enforcement actions in or near areas that require special protection," the memorandum said on Wednesday. "It is effective immediately."

Areas considered "protected" include schools ranging from pre-school to university, the memorandum said.

Medical facilities considered protected areas include hospitals, health clinics, vaccination or testing sites and community health centers, the memorandum said.

In addition, immigration-related arrests will not be allowed at places of worship, whether at buildings dedicated to activities of faith or a temporary location, the memorandum said.

US immigration enforcement arrests are also prohibited at recreation centers and parks, social services facilities, disaster relief sites, funerals, demonstrations and rallies, the memorandum added.

However, US authorities may be able to take action in these safe spaces if there's a serious national security threat or risk of violence and death, according to the memorandum.

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Nearly Half of Americans Say Fauci Lied About Funding Gain-of-Function Research - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Nearly half of US voters say National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director Anthony Fauci lied about funding gain-of-function virus research such as that at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed.

"The latest Rasmussen Reports national telephone and online survey finds that only 33% of Likely US voters believe Fauci has told the truth about US government funding for gain-of-function virus research. That's a decline from June, when 40% believed Fauci had told the truth. Forty-nine percent (49%) now say Fauci hasn't told the truth about funding gain-of-function research," Rasmussen Reports said.

Gain-of-function is controversial research conducted by some scientists to enable pathogens to be more transmissible in an effort to find out more about possible preventative measures.

Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as well as Republican lawmakers have pointed toward the Wuhan Institute of Virology and their gain-of-function research as a possible origin of the novel coronavirus.

Fauci has testified under oath in Congress that he and his colleagues did not engage in gain-of-function research and if some did, they did so according to established rules. However, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) last Wednesday admitted that its partner EcoHealth

Alliance did engage in such research. Numerous lawmakers, and Senator Rand Paul in particular, have said Fauci lied to Congress about US-funded gain of function research in Wuhan and should resign.

The Rasmussen Reports poll also found that almost half of US voters, 46%, believe that Fauci should be forced to resign and that 71% believe that the novel coronavirus originated in a Chinese laboratory.

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Hackers Breach US National Rifle Association, Threaten to Release Stolen Files - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - A cybercriminal group known as Grief hacked the US National Rifle Association (NRA) and is threatening to release a trove of stole files if they are not paid a ransom, NBC News reported.

The cybercrime group already posted 13 NRA files on it website, the report said on Wednesday. The NRA did not respond to a request for comment on the matter, the report added.

Most of the files posted on the group's website are about NRA grants and details of a recent NRA meeting, according to the report.

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Aviation Market in Russia, Former Soviet Union Needs 1,540 New Aircraft By 2040 - Boeing

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Commercial airlines in Russia, Ukraine and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) will need 1,540 new airplanes valued at \$200 billion over the next two decades, according to Boeing's 2021 Commercial Market Outlook. "Boeing is ready to support carriers in Russia, Ukraine and CIS as they transform their business models and take advantage of opportunities for further growth," Boeing General Manager for Commercial Marketing in the region Randy Heisey said in a press release explaining the report on Wednesday. "Aviation is vitally important for enabling robust domestic tourism growth and a rebound in long-haul leisure travel while also supporting trade and cargo links across a huge geographic region."

In addition to the \$200 billion cost of new planes, the region will also need aftermarket aviation services such as passenger-to-freighter conversions, maintenance and repair, and digital services worth an additional \$320 billion, the release said.

Air traffic is projected to grow by 2.9 percent annually, with the overall fleet expected to exceed 2,000 aircraft by 2040, the release said.

Single-aisle airplanes will represent 75 percent of deliveries, with demand driven by growth in the low-cost carrier segment, including opportunities for new and expanding low-cost airlines, the release added.

Boeing's footprint in Russia, Ukraine and CIS includes the Boeing Design Center employing more than 2,000 engineers in Moscow and Kiev. The company also runs its Flight Training Campus and Research and Technology center in Moscow and operates a joint venture with the titanium supplier VSMPO-AVISMA, according to the release.

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US Defense Chief to Meet Slovakian Counterpart on Thursday at Pentagon - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will meet with his Slovakian counterpart on Thursday in Washington, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III will welcome the Slovakian Minister of Defense Jaroslav Nad' to the Pentagon in an enhanced honor cordon ceremony at 10:00 a.m. EDT, on Thursday, Oct. 28, 2021," the release said on Wednesday.

The release did not provide details about the discussions between the two military chiefs.

Austin recently returned from a trip to Ukraine, Georgia, Romania as well as Belgium, where he attended the NATO defense ministerial, where he discussed a range of mutual concerns with his counterparts including matters related to Russia.

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UN Relief Coordinator Asks Syrian Parties to Agree on Modality for Cross-Line Aid

UNITED NATIONS, October 27 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths called on the parties in Syria to agree on a modality to enable timely distribution of humanitarian aid brought from Damascus.

"I urge... all concerned parties to ensure that cross-line missions and the aid distributions associated with them proceed without delays. If cross-line operations are to be a sustainable way of reaching more people, then we need agreement on a suitable distribution modality that is acceptable to all the relevant parties," Griffiths said in a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

Griffiths pointed out that humanitarian partners in Syria are currently preparing another World Food Program (WFP) cross-line delivery into the northwest of the country in November.

In August, a WFP delivery reached Idlib and is awaiting full agreement from the parties to be distributed to the people in need, Griffiths said. He also expressed hope the volume of cross-border aid in Syria could be increased.

"I'm quietly optimistic that we will be able to further expand cross-line access over the coming months. And you can be sure that we will certainly do our part," Griffiths said.

In July, the UN Security Council, through the resolution extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism using a crossing in Turkey for six months, requested the expansion of cross-line aid deliveries from within the country that Damascus can directly oversee.

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UN Relief Coordinator Warns of COVID-19 Resurgence in Syria as Only 2% People Vaccinated

UNITED NATIONS, October 27 (Sputnik) - Syria is facing a resurgence of COVID-19 cases as less than 2% of the population have been vaccinated, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said in a Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

"On top of increasing poverty, the water crisis and worsening food security, people in Syria are also facing a resurgence of COVID-19. Cases are surging, ICUs are at full capacity, and vaccination rates remain below 2%," Griffiths said.

The UN official pointed out that nearly 2 million people in the northwest of Syria live in refugee camps, which are often overcrowded and lacking basic sanitation and hygiene.

Griffiths said the humanitarian situation in Syria continues to deteriorate and, without affecting a change, it will only keep on worsening each month.

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Pope Francis Willing to Visit Canada to Facilitate Reconciliation with Indigenous People

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - Pope Francis is willing to pay an apostolic visit to Canada at the invitation of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to help efforts to reconcile with Indigenous people following disturbing revelations about the death of hundreds of indigenous children at former residential schools, the Holy See Press Office said on Wednesday.

Earlier in September, the Catholic Church of Canada apologized to the country's indigenous peoples for the suffering caused to children in former church-run residential schools, following the scandal over the shocking discovery in May of the remains of 215 Indigenous children in a former indigenous residential school in Kamloops in the province of British Columbia.

"The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has invited the Holy Father to make an apostolic journey to Canada, also in the context of the long-standing pastoral process of reconciliation with indigenous peoples. His Holiness has indicated his willingness to visit the country on a date to be settled in due course," the Holy See Press Office said in the statement.

In June, Pope Francis reached out to the Catholic Church of Canada, expressing his pain for the "shocking discovery" and calling on Canada's political and religious authorities to embark on "a path of reconciliation and healing."

In late May, the remains of 215 children were found in the Canadian province of British Columbia, on the territory of a former boarding school, which operated in 1890-1969 under the control of the Catholic Church, later came under the control of the federal government and existed until 1978.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998, in a process equated to "cultural genocide." The report uncovered around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) -

JCPOA TALKS

- * The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations in Vienna will resume by the end of November, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani said on Wednesday.
- * The United States is aware of reports that Iran is ready to resume the JCPOA talks in Vienna and believes it is possible to quickly reach a deal to revive the accord a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.
- * White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said it is up to the chief negotiators to decide when the next round of talks with Iran on the JCPOA will take place.

SUDAN

- * The ambassadors of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States among others met with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok at his residence after he was released from detention following the military coup, the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan said in on Wednesday.
- * UN Special Representative for Sudan Volker Perthes met with Hamdok after the latter was allowed to return home following a military coup and his detention, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.
- * Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov discussed the situation in Sudan with US Special Envoy Jeffrey Feltman over the telephone, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Any changes to the transitional government in Sudan conducted by force will put at risk United States financial assistance to the African country, US Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills said.
- * The World Bank has suspended all disbursements to Sudan following the military takeover of the transitional government, World Bank Group President David Malpass announced.

GAS CRISIS IN EUROPE

* Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller met with Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Spinu and Moldovagaz head Vadim Ceban to discuss a new contract for the supply of gas to the republic, Gazprom said on Wednesday.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the government to prepare a set of measures by November 1 to prevent any negative consequences on the global energy markets from affecting Russian industries.

* Russian gas giant Gazprom made up for the shortage of US gas in Europe, the volume of supplies turned out to be even bigger than that withdrawn by the United States from the European market, Putin said.

* The level of gas reserves in the European storage facilities is much lower than the average volume during the past five years, Putin said.

ALEC BALDWIN CASE IN US

* Santa Fe County Sheriff Adan Mendoza said during a press conference on Wednesday that two individuals handled the loaded firearm with which actor Alec Baldwin ended up shooting dead cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounding movie director Joel Souza.

* Law enforcement officers in the US state of New Mexico suspect they found additional live rounds of ammunition on a movie set where Baldwin shot and killed Hutchins and injured another crew member, Santa Fe County Sheriff Adan Mendoza said.

* David Halls, an assistant director in the movie "Rust," did not conduct a full safety inspection of the prop gun that was used when Baldwin accidentally shot and killed Hutchins during a rehearsal on set last week, according to a new search warrant Sputnik obtained from the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office.

BOMB THREAT IN WASHINGTON

* Police have increased their presence inside the US Capitol after a bomb threat was reported in the nearby Department of Health and Human Services building, the Fox5 TV channel reported on Wednesday.

* The headquarters of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in Washington was evacuated out of abundance of caution due to a reported bomb threat, HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Sarah Lovenheim told Sputnik.

TURKISH DRONE USE IN UKRAINE

* Moscow is clarifying information about Kiev's use of Turkish drones in the Donbas, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

* The information about the use of a Bayraktar drone in Donbas comes only from Kiev and is not confirmed by the Donetsk People's Republic and the monitoring mission of the OSCE, a source told Sputnik.

* Germany is aware of the Ukrainian armed forces' use of a Bayraktar drones in the Donbas and emphasizes that drones can only be used by the OSCE monitoring mission in line with the Minsk agreements, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Andrea Sasse said.

* Information about the Ukrainian armed forces' use of a Bayraktar drone in Donbas is being verified, there is no confirmation yet, self-proclaimed Donbas People's Republic (DPR) Foreign Minister Natalya Nikonorova said.

* Deliveries of Turkish drones to Ukraine may lead to negative consequences and further destabilization of the situation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Brazilian President Slams Senate Special Commission's Charges as Farce

RIO DE JANEIRO, October 27 (Sputnik) - Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro slammed the Senate special commission's report charging him with nine crimes in handling the COVID-19 outbreak as farce.

"Anyone who is prudent enough understands that it was farce, this parliamentary commission of Renan's inquiry. Perhaps this is revenge?" Bolsonaro said in a television appearance.

The president also added that the commission's rapporteur, Senator Renan Calheiros, is attacking him out of revenge for old personal quarrels with his son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro. The politician nevertheless acknowledged that the work of this commission has a great influence on the international level.

"As for the country's image in the world, it is terrible - it is believed that we live under a dictatorship, that I detain journalists, that I attack freedom of speech, that I have killed COVID patients," Bolsonaro said, adding that this image negatively affects the economy, hitting at investments, tourism, fuel and inflation.

Earlier on Wednesday, senators handed the special commission's report to the republic's attorney general, who now has 30 days to decide whether to file a formal complaint against the president. The list of the accused also includes three children of Bolsonaro, current and former ministers, federal deputies and businessmen. They are held responsible for a large number of victims of the COVID-19 pandemic, violation of sanitary measures, quackery, incitement to crime, falsification of documents, irrational use of public funds, malfeasance, crimes against humanity and violation of social rights.

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European Gas Prices Slip on Reports of Russian Plan to Fill EU Storage

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - Natural gas futures were trading lower on the European market on Wednesday on the expectation of an increase in Russian gas supplies, according to US exchange operator ICE Futures.

Dutch TTF Gas Futures, a leading European natural gas benchmark, settled 4.4% below their Tuesday price, shedding 3% during the day. They closed at a low of \$1,014.8 per 1,000 cubic meters.

Earlier in the day, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the boss of the state energy giant Gazprom to start pumping gas into European storage once it finishes filling domestic reservoirs, which may happen by November 8.

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US 7-Day Average in COVID-19 Cases Decreases By 16 Percent - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - The seven-day average in coronavirus cases shows a 16 percent decrease compared to last week, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CD) Director Rochelle Walensky told reporters on Wednesday.

"As of yesterday, the 7-day daily average in cases was about 65,900 per day. This represents 16 percent decrease over the previous week," Walensky said during a virtual press briefing. The United States is moving in the right direction but the number of cases is still high, she said, adding that Americans should continue to be vigilant during the colder and dryer winter months. Walensky also said the number of hospitalizations also shows a serious decrease. COVID-19-associated deaths also continue to decline, she added.

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Ex-Texas Oil Regulator Says Nord Stream 2 Could Help Alleviate Energy Crisis in Europe

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Former Texas oil regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik that Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline may help alleviate the energy crisis in Europe, but fully resolving the problem would take a dramatic shift in investment strategy in oil and gas developments in the region.

"Individually, they do create additional market access, I think it will help, but in the end it's still overall a supply and demand problem," Sitton said regarding Nord Stream 2. "I don't know that any one pipeline or any one new facility is going to be able to swing that. You'll have to see sort of a shift in total investment strategy."

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was completed on September 10 and will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12 EU Gas Directive.

The peak price of gas futures in Europe reached \$1,937 per 1,000 cubic meters on October 6 and thereafter began to fall, but has recently remained steady at \$1,000.

Sitton, a former commissioner with the Texas Railroad Commission, pointed out that Europe may arguably be in worse shape than the United States because their oil and gas operations have been tied up with a lack of investments in refineries or gas infrastructure.

"They [Europeans] buy a ton of natural gas from Russia... The Russians, you look at Gazprom and the Russian oil companies, these companies are probably making more money than any other companies in the world," Sitton said. "They literally are making more money than Amazon, than Walmart, than Apple, because they are selling their oil and gas to Europe at such a premium price."

Global energy use has been impacted by efforts to cut carbon emissions. The Biden administration has said it aims to have a carbon neutral US economy by 2050 and many other nations have pledged to take similar steps in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.

Nearly two years since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, pent-up demand due to governments' measures has created an oil supply crisis which has sent crude prices skyrocketing from below \$49 per barrel at the end of last year to above \$80 at present. Sitton said he thinks the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) refuses to increase oil production as a means to ease pandemic-induced inflation because they want to provide capital to develop oil reserves.

"They have been fairly consistent in this idea that \$70 to \$80 a barrel oil is a good market price... they feel like that's a price that around the world most people are willing to pay," Sitton added.

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Biden Green Policies, Anti-Oil Push Hurt Investment Opportunities - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's renewable energy initiative and the green political movement created an environment that discourages investments in the oil and gas industry, former Texas oil regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

"Absolutely, I think that's arguably one of the biggest problems that the industry is facing today," Sitton said regarding Biden's climate policies and the green trade. "Certainly in the last 12 months, the amount of capital investments in oil and gas developments has dropped dramatically from where it was over the last ten years and that's due a lot in part of the fact that investors are listening to politicians who are saying that we are going to go away from oil and we're going to try to give tax and other subsidies to non-hydro carbon energy sources."

The Biden administration's climate policies aim to steer the United States on a course towards developing a carbon neutral economy by 2050. Many other nations have pledged to take similar steps in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.

Sitton said the fact the oil and gas industry is losing investors' dollars to green energy companies is another factor in the supply crisis.

"So you combine that with the political posturing and the investment changes that have followed, there is simply not enough oil in the world today to provide for all of the demand," Sitton said.

He also said some oil and gas companies that want to extract more oil around the world are having trouble finding a bank to finance their projects.

"There are some banks, especially European banks, who have stopped loaning to oil and gas companies," Sitton said. "So another problem is if you lower prices today and reduce the amount of cash that oil companies have, it will mean there will be less oil in the future because there's less money available to drill with."

About 80 percent of the world's energy, Sitton noted, still comes from hydrocarbon.

The former Texas oil regulator believes the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) refuses to increase oil production as a means to make up for drastic losses caused by the pandemic and to provide capital to develop oil reserves.

"Over the last couple of years where the oil business saw its most tumultuous price environment and you can see that they have weathered the storm of COVID and government pressures and ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] pressures and I don't think they're inclined to try to lower prices without a good reason to do so," Sitton said.

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Ex-Texas Oil Regulator Predicts US Gas Prices May Remain High for 'Couple of Years'

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US consumers should expect gasoline prices to remain high for the next couple of years as the energy industry strives to make up for substantial losses sustained amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, former Texas oil regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

"If we maintain the current political environment which is keeping people, investors especially and institutions, retirement funds and those sort of things, if those people continue to be hesitant to spend money or to loan money or to invest money in oil, then we're going to see high prices for a long time, maybe for a couple of years," Sitton said.

Gasoline prices could start to decline in the latter part of next year if the Biden administration pulls back on its efforts to cut emissions in the United States and to persuade other countries to do the same, Sitton said.

"You're already seeing this a little bit... I think they [Biden administration] realized they created a problem and that they have somehow caused this," Sitton said. "I think between their language softening and prices coming up, I think what is going to happen is investors are probably going to get a little more confident. It will be easier for private equity groups and investor organizations to raise money at that point. Once you see drilling activity pick up at a faster rate, then prices will come back down."

President Joe Biden aims to trim carbon emissions and set the United States on a path to have a carbon neutral economy by 2050.

However, Sitton said any re-election hopes Biden has could be damaged if his supporters end up paying high gasoline prices across the country over the next two years.

Last week, Biden said during a town hall meeting that he expects gas prices to come down sometime next year. He also pointed out tapping into the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve would have a minimal effect.

Sitton agrees that pouring oil from the US strategic oil reserve into the market would not lower gasoline prices because much more change is needed across the board to create a long-term impact.

"Simply releasing a little oil from the strategic oil reserve may do a little bit, but certainly not very much," Sitton said. "It would have a minor impact today."

The oil price is not set by the amount of oil production, Sitton said, it's set by refineries purchasing 12-month oil contracts that are driven by the supply and demand ratios they are anticipating.

"More oil could be in the market in three months, but if you say you want a lot more oil, well then you need a lot of companies doing this activity and once again that costs a lot of money and because oil prices were so low during covid and because of all this investment pull back, there isn't a lot of money available," Sitton said. "We may have to wait for prices to be high for a while before the companies have enough money to go drill."

One of the issues Biden is also facing, he added, is Iranian oil production is a flexible amount that is hard to predict because of pending sanctions and the tensions between the US and Tehran. Hence, Biden is trying to balance geopolitics as well, Sitton said.

"He [Biden] wants to look strong but it's hard to look strong if you're begging other countries to produce more oil and at the same time not look like you want them to produce more oil because you're trying to maintain your green philosophy," Sitton said. "He's walking a difficult tight rope and I think he's struggling to stay on it."

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), he added, may be refusing to increase oil production as a means to make up for drastic losses caused by the pandemic and to provide capital to develop oil reserves.

"Over the last couple of years where the oil business saw its most tumultuous price environment and you can see that they have weathered the storm of COVID and government pressures and ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] pressures and I don't think they're inclined to try to lower prices without a good reason to do so," Sitton said.

Nearly two years since the start of the pandemic, pent-up demand has created an oil supply crisis which has sent crude prices skyrocketing from below \$49 per barrel at the end of last year to above \$80 at present.

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US Congress Needs to Clarify Public Broadcaster Protection From Political Meddling - GAO

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Congress should act to protect public broadcasters in six networks overseen by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) from political meddling, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Wednesday.

"According to USAGM, the firewall protecting the networks' independence is central to the credibility and effectiveness of USAGM's networks," the report said. "However, the parameters of the firewall are not specifically laid out in legislation."

GAO said in the report the delineation of what is and is not permissible under the firewall may help ensure the professional independence and integrity of the agency and its networks.

"Network and USAGM officials said that previous members of USAGM leadership took several actions that did not align with USAGM's firewall principles. According to USAGM, the firewall protecting the networks' independence is central to the credibility and effectiveness of USAGM's networks," the report added.

Amendments to legislation have affected USAGM's governing authorities and organizational structure by shifting authority from a bipartisan board to a CEO, with advice from an Advisory Board, according to the report.

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Biden Admin. Dodges Standard Regulatory Rulemaking to Rush Vaccine Mandate - Lawmakers

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Two senior Republican members of Congress have sent a letter to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) criticizing the Biden administration for taking shortcuts on federal rulemaking to impose a national coronavirus vaccine mandate on government employers, US Congressman Jason Smith said on Wednesday.

"Today, House Budget Committee Republican Leader Jason Smith and House Oversight and Reform Committee Republican Leader James Comer in a letter to the OMB, excoriated the Biden administration over its efforts to shortchange the federal rulemaking process in order to impose a national vaccine mandate on employers," Smith said in a press release.

Smith and Comer called on the OMB Acting Director to immediately withdraw the rule, the release said.

"With no Senate confirmed leadership at the top of OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, the Biden Administration has left a serious lack of accountability at a very powerful agency. ...OMB is attempting to bypass the standard rulemaking process to rush through a nationwide mandate on employers," the letter said.

Comer said President Joe Biden's vaccine mandate was authoritarian and it imposed troubling and possibly illegal constraints on US businesses and their employees, the release added.

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US, Turkey Hold 'Productive' Talks on Ankara's Removal From F-35 Jet Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - The US and Turkish delegations held productive dispute resolution talks over Turkey's removal from the F-35 fighter jet program due to their purchase of

Russian S-400 air defense systems, Defense Department spokesperson Lt. Col. Anton Semelroth said on Wednesday.

"Principal Director for Europe and NATO Policy Andrew L. Winternitz and Director for Planning, Programs and Analysis in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment Melissa Benkert led a US Department of Defense delegation to Ankara on October 27 for dispute resolution discussions to address remaining issues resulting from Turkey's removal from the F-35 program," Semelroth said.

The Defense Department spokesperson said the discussions were "productive," adding that the delegations plan to meet again in the coming months in Washington.

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German Intelligence Detected No Foreign Interference in Parliamentary Elections

BERLIN, October 27 (Sputnik) - The German intelligence services did not identify any significant interference in the electoral process during the elections to the Bundestag, which took place in September, but recorded information attacks on candidates and the spread of fake news, the President of the German Federal Intelligence Agency, Bruno Kahl, said on Wednesday.

"In these elections, as well as in the previous regional elections, we did not record any activity that would be directed specifically at the election process and its legitimacy ... What we have recorded is the growth of the so-called background noise - the activity of foreign intelligence services and actors who are present both in the media and on social networks to impact existing public discussions that can contribute to the division of society, facilitate radicalization. This activity slightly increased before the elections, but cannot be characterized as a campaign," Kahl said at the hearing in the Bundestag.

The President of Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, a counterintelligence service, Thomas Haldenwang, said that in the run-up to the elections, the intelligence services detected "massive campaigns against individual participants, especially Green Party's candidate for chancellor, Annalena Baerbock, who was attacked using fake information, for example through the spread of fake news," adding that every politician attacked was informed of such incidents.

On September 26, Germany held parliamentary elections, in which the Social Democrats emerged victorious, marginally outperforming outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel's ruling conservative bloc of the Christian Democratic and Christian Social Unions. The Green Party and the Free Democratic Party came in third and fourth places, respectively, followed by the far-right Alternative for Germany and the Left Party.

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Americans' Fear Economy Weakening Despite Record 74% Saying 'Good Time' to Get Job - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Americans' expectations for the US economy fell to the lowest point since early in the coronavirus pandemic, despite three-fourths of adults saying now is a good time to apply for a job, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Three-quarters of Americans rate current economic conditions in the country as only fair (42%) or poor (33%), and 68% say the economy is getting worse," Gallup said in a press release combining data on economic confidence and job-hunting prospects from an October 1-19 survey.

The current -25 point reading in Gallup's economic confidence index for October is the lowest since -33 in April 2020 and -28 the next month, when unemployment was spiking as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, the release said.

The index has a theoretical range of plus 100 if all respondents say the economy is excellent or good and that it is getting better, and minus 100 if everyone says the economy is poor and getting worse, the release said.

Although Americans this month are more pessimistic about the US economy, 74% say now is a good time to find a quality job, a record since Gallup began asking the question in 2001, the release added.

Although the number of coronavirus cases in the United States began to wane in recent weeks, the economic effects persist as employers in many industries struggle to fill job openings, according to the release.

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Moldova to Buy 1.5Mln Cubic Meters From Swiss, Polish Gas Suppliers

CHISINAU, October 27 (Sputnik) - Moldova will buy a total 1.5 million cubic meters of natural gas from the Swiss gas trader DXT Commodities and the state-run Polish producer PGNiG, the Moldovan Trade Ministry's Public Property Agency said on Wednesday.

"The tender announced on the third day by the central electricity supplier, Energocom, was won by two bidders. They are DXT Commodities... and the Polish company PGNiG, which will pump the natural gas through Moldovan pipelines tomorrow," a statement read.

This is the third trial purchase bid auctioned by the eastern European nation this week in an effort to diversify gas supplies. It bought a million cubic meters of gas from PGNiG on Monday and another million from the Dutch company Vitol on Tuesday.

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US Special Envoy Says No Information on Date for Next Round of Strategic Talks With Russia

UNITED NATIONS, October 27 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation Jeffrey Eberhard said on Wednesday that he did not have information whether the next round of US-Russia strategic talks will take place before the end of the year.

"I have no idea, I have to check with your [Russian] government," Eberhard said when asked during a press briefing whether the next round of US-Russia strategic talks may take place before the end of 2021.

In February, Russia and the United States agreed to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) for another five years without any renegotiation of its terms.

The New START - the only arms control agreement between two countries that is still in force - is now set to expire on February 5, 2026.

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India Conducts Launch of Surface-to-Surface Ballistic Missile - Defense Ministry
MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - India completed a successful launch of the new nuclear-capable Surface to Surface Agni-5 Ballistic Missile, the country's Ministry of Defense said on Wednesday.

"A successful launch of the Surface to Surface Ballistic Missile, Agni-5, was carried out on October 27, 2021 at approximately 1950 hrs from APJ Abdul Kalam Island, Odisha," Ministry said in a statement published on its website.

India has already conducted seven trials of the missile, which has a range of over 3100 miles — with China raising concern over the tests. The first successful test of the Agni-5 was conducted on April 19, 2012. India has already conducted 6 successful tests of Agni-5 from 2013 to 2018. The launch of the Agni-5 Ballistic Missile, capable of striking targets with a very high degree of accuracy, is in line with India's nuclear minimal deterrence strategy, which is based on the "no first use" principle with an assured second-strike capability.

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Taliban Delegation Meets with Western, Japanese Envoys in Doha – Spokesman

KABUL, October 27 (Sputnik) - A delegation of the Taliban (banned in Russia) led by the militant group's acting foreign minister met with German, Norwegian, Dutch and Japanese envoys in Doha on Wednesday, a Taliban spokesman said on Wednesday.

"Amir Khan Muttaqi and the accompanying delegation met with representatives and ambassadors from Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and Norway in Doha, Qatar," Bilal Karimi tweeted.

He said the senior Taliban official also met with envoys from 14, mostly European, countries in the evening to call on the world powers to recognize the Taliban-run Afghan government and

ask them to urge the United States to unfreeze billions of dollars belonging to the Afghan central bank.

Earlier in the day, Muttaqi also met with the US mission chief for Afghanistan in Doha, Ian McCary, the group said.

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France to Impose Sanctions Against UK for Fisheries Dispute - Government Spokesperson

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - France will impose the first sanctions against the UK on November 2 for non-compliance with an agreement on licenses for French fishermen, French government spokesman Gabriel Attal said on Wednesday.

Under the Brexit trade deal, which came into force on January 1, 2020, EU fishermen continue to have some rights to fish in UK waters as part of a transition period until 2026.

"When the parties sign an agreement under Brexit, it must be respected. Our patience is running out. In such circumstances, we plan to announce a number of measures, some of which will come into force next Tuesday [on November 2]. Another package of measures may come into effect the week after because we want the agreement to be respected and our fishermen to be able to operate in accordance with the provisions that were negotiated under this agreement with Britain," Attal said at a briefing following the meeting of the Cabinet.

In early October, French Prime Minister Jean Castex called on the European Commission to strictly oversee compliance with the obligations undertaken by the UK on the issue of granting licenses, and did not rule out a revision of bilateral cooperation with London in various areas in case of non-compliance with the agreements.

At the end of September, the British Ministry of the Environment reported that 1,700 vessels from the EU received licenses to fish in the UK waters, of which 117 were issued to vessels from the EU for fishing in a zone of 6-12 nautical miles. The ministry issued only 12 licenses to French fishermen, having considered 47 applications.

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WHO Welcomes MSD's Licensing Decision to Allow Outside Production of COVID-19 Drug

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - World Health Organization (WHO) welcomes the signing of a licensing agreement by the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) and MSD (Merck & Co.

pharmaceutical company) to develop access to molnupiravir, a new medicine for treating COVID-19 in adults, WHO said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Merck announced that it has reached a deal with the UN-backed MPP, permitting the latter to license non-exclusive sublicenses to manufacturers and diversify the manufacturing base for the supply of molnupiravir to countries covered by the MPP License.

Merck said it will not receive royalties for as long as COVID-19 remains classified as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the WHO.

"The MPP/MSD licensing agreement is a positive step towards creating broader access to the treatment as quickly as possible by allowing generic licensees from around the world to prepare supplies and create more affordable versions of the medicine, pending WHO recommendations and other regulatory authorizations," WHO stated on Wednesday.

Molnupiravir, an investigational oral antiviral medicine, was reported to reduce the hospitalization risk in patients with mild to moderate COVID-19 by 50% during the clinical trials. It is currently being assessed to be included in the WHO living guideline on COVID-19 therapeutics and is awaiting authorization for its use from governing bodies.

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Polish Justice Ministry Suggests Withholding EU Contributions After Court of Justice Fine
WARSAW, October 27 (Sputnik) - The Deputy Minister of Justice of Poland, Marcin Romanowski, offered not to pay contributions to the European Union's budget and ignore the decisions of the EU Court of Justice.

Earlier on Wednesday, the European Court of Justice ordered that Poland pay a fine worth \$1.16 million daily until it acts on the court's previous ruling to abolish the controversial Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court.

"The decisions of the EU court, which interfere with the competence of the Polish authorities, should be ignored. The non-elected and undemocratic bodies of the EU will not put themselves above the Polish society and block reforms [judicial reforms, including the formation of a disciplinary chamber] despite its democratic will," Romanowski wrote on Twitter, adding that "maybe the suspension of contributions will make the eurocrats think."

On Wednesday, Deputy Speaker of the Polish Lower House Ryszard Terlecki told the reporters that he sees no need to panic over the fines that the European Court of Justice imposed on Poland, since the country "has not paid a single fine yet," adding that "drafts to liquidate the disciplinary chamber are ready ... It has been delayed a little, but let's not exaggerate, it's only been a few weeks."

The European Union (EU) has criticized Poland for several judicial reforms — including the formation of a disciplinary chamber with the Polish Supreme Court eligible to remove judges from their posts — which it considered infringing upon the independence of the Polish judiciary. In July, the EU court demanded the immediate termination of the work of the disciplinary chamber, which Warsaw refused to do, insisting that its national constitution takes precedence over EU law.

After Poland agreed earlier in October to suspend the work of the chamber, the European Commission suggested that Poland failed to fully implement the court decision and asked the court of justice to introduce financial sanctions against Warsaw.

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US Attorney General Says Committed to Providing Public Report on Durham's Russia Probe

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland told the Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday that the Justice Department is committed to providing a public report of Special Counsel John Durham's Russia probe once it is completed.

"I would like as much as possible to be made public. I have to be concerned about privacy act concerns and classification, but other than that the commitment is to provide a public report,"

Garland said in response to a question from US Senator Marsha Blackburn.

Blackburn co-signed a letter with Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in August calling upon Garland to make public the results of Durham's investigation into FBI actions in the Trump-Russia collusion probe, including the FBI spying on the Trump campaign.

Durham was initially scheduled to present the results of his investigation by the end of this summer but this term was pushed back.

Garland also affirmed to Blackburn that there will be no political or otherwise undue interference with Durham's investigation.

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White House Says Cannot Confirm Biden Would Meet With Turkey's Erdogan in Glasgow

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that she could not confirm a possible meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and US President Joe Biden in Glasgow.

The Turkish media outlet TRT reported earlier on Wednesday that Erdogan said he would meet with Biden in Glasgow, Scotland, during the COP26 climate summit.

"Certainly, I understand the interest and I expect we will have more on the bilateral[s] in the next day or two, but I don't have anything to confirm quite yet," Psaki said.

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White House Says Chief Negotiators to Decide on Date for Next Round of Talks With Iran

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday that it is up to the chief negotiators to decide when the next round of talks with Iran on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will take place.

Earlier on Wednesday, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani said the JCPOA negotiations in Vienna will resume by the end of November.

When asked about Iran's statement, Psaki said, "I know they've made similar comments over the last several days or week, I should say."

Psaki emphasized that the United States remains committed to pursuing a diplomatic path forward.

"I would leave it to lead negotiators to determine when the next round of discussions will be. Our framing continues to be compliance for compliance, and we will leave up to the Europeans and our negotiators to determine when the next step would be," she said.

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Biden Names 4 Nominees to Serve as US Attorneys - White House

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has named four nominees to serve as US attorneys throughout the United States, the White House announced on Wednesday.

"President Biden is announcing four new nominees to serve as US Attorneys across the country, officials who will be indispensable to upholding the rule of law as the top federal law enforcement officials for their districts," the White House said in a statement.

The four candidates were chosen "for their devotion to enforcing the law, their professionalism, their experience and credentials in this field," the statement said.

The first candidate is Cindy Chung, who was nominated for the US Attorney nominee for the Western District of Pennsylvania, the statement said. Gregory Harris was nominated for the US Attorney for the Central District of Illinois, Gary Restaino for the District of Arizona and Philip Sellinger for the District of New Jersey, the statement added.

The White House noted in the statement that the Biden administration has launched an effort to take on the uptick in gun crimes.

"Confirming US Attorneys as the chief federal law enforcement officers in their district is important for these efforts," the statement said.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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COVID-19 Crisis Wiped Out Decade of Progress Fighting World Hunger - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic through 2020 and 2021 has set the world back at least ten years in the fight to eliminate hunger in the developing countries,

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration Lesley Ziman told a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"A decade of progress against malnutrition has been erased," Ziman told a hearing of the US House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Relations Related Operations.

Subcommittee Chair Barbara Lee acknowledged what she called "the crippling effect" that the pandemic had had on food security around the world and the still wide inequalities that existed in wealth in most countries.

The world was not yet lined up to take appropriate and sufficient coordinated actions to combat the pandemic and its destructive effects on global economies, US Agency for International Development (USAID) official Sarah Charles told the hearing.

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World Must Control Pandemic in 2022 or Face Danger From Virus Variants - US Official

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Governments around the world must get the coronavirus pandemic under control next year or risk seeing the virus mutate into new, unpredictable and potentially more dangerous forms, US Agency for International Development (USAID) COVID-19 Task Force Executive Director Jeremy Konyndyk said on Wednesday.

"We can control this pandemic in the next year or we can let it run for several more years," Konyndyk said. "The longer we let it run, the greater the risks: We have seen this with the Delta variant."

However, USAID official Sarah Charles, assistant to the administrator of the agency's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, cautioned that neither the United States nor other governments around the world had generated enough collective credibility to generate the popular support and political will needed to suppress the pandemic.

"We need to get to that 70% vaccination level in all the countries. We do not have enough political capital globally ... The questions about hesitancy and vaccine deliverance are real. The prognosis is positive but we've got a tremendous amount of work to do in 2022," she said.

Konyndyk emphasized that trust in governments around the world remained a "really important factor." He said popular compliance with public health measures ensured far greater effectiveness and he cautioned that without widespread trust in government it was far harder to control the pandemic.

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Swedish Public Health Agency Recommends COVID-19 Re-vaccination for Citizens Over 65

ZURICH, October 27 (Sputnik) - The Public Health Agency of Sweden has recommended giving a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine to residents over 65 and healthcare professionals, according to the agency's statement on Wednesday.

"The Swedish Public Health Agency recommends offering everyone who is 65 years old and over, as well as nursing home staff, social workers and health workers, an additional dose of COVID-19 vaccine," the statement said.

The agency recommended applying a booster dose of the vaccine no earlier than six months after the second vaccination.

More than 80% of the population, which is 6.8 million people, are fully vaccinated in the country, according to the latest data from the Swedish Public Health Agency.

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France Sees Resurging Pandemic as Hospitalizations Rise

PARIS, October 27 (Sputnik) - The French government is alarmed by a rising trend in COVID-19 cases, with hospital admissions continuing to edge upwards, a cabinet spokesperson said Wednesday.

"The signs of the pandemic picking up speed are here. The rise is small but sensitive... We see at least 5,400 new cases a day, a rise of almost 16% from last week. This means the epidemic is progressing," Gabriel Attal told reporters.

The nationwide COVID-19 incidence has again passed 50 cases per 100,000 people. The number of hospitalizations has been climbing, while the number of patients in intensive care remains stable. A total of 1,038 people were in ICU as of Tuesday.

At the same time, Attal said that the government was encouraged by the vaccination rates. He said more than 80% of those eligible to be immunized had already received two vaccine doses.

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Strengthening Ties With South Korea Russia's Priority in Asia-Pacific Region - Lavrov

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - Strengthening ties with South Korea is one of the main priorities of Russian policy in the Asia-Pacific region, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

"Strengthening ties with the Republic of Korea is one of our top priorities in the Asia-Pacific region. And we highly appreciate the reciprocal attitude of our Korean neighbors to develop close, partner relations with the Russian Federation," Lavrov said at a meeting with his South Korean counterpart Chung Eui-yong.

South Korean Foreign Minister, in turn, noted that Russia is an important partner of the country in the region.

"Russia is a key partner for South Korea in promoting a New Northern Policy," Chung said.

After the meeting, Lavrov noted that both countries share a high assessment of bilateral ties in the field of business and investment policy.

"We have a high assessment of the investment activity of the South Korean business in the Russian Far East. We also welcomed the intensification of bilateral cooperation in the Arctic. Mr. Chung, expressing satisfaction with the activity of Korean business in our country, also expressed a wish that Russian business should more actively explore the market of the Republic of Korea," Lavrov added.

The New Northern Policy was established by South Korean President Moon Jae-in in 2017 with an aim to strengthen economic and political cooperation with countries to the north of Korea. President Moon also launched the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation to engage more actively with countries in the region covered by the policy, including Russia. The South Korean Foreign Minister is in Russia on a three-day working visit. Chung's trip marks the end of a Russian-Korean cultural exchange year, timed to the 30th anniversary of their diplomatic ties.

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Apple Doubles Suppliers Committed to 100% Clean Power in Bid for Carbon Neutrality by 2030

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US computer giant Apple announced a series of clean energy commitments from its suppliers on Wednesday, bolstering plans for carbon neutrality across the company's entire supply chain by the end of the decade.

"In total, 175 Apple suppliers will transition to using renewable energy, and the company and its suppliers will bring online more than 9 gigawatts of clean power around the world," Apple said in a press release.

By more than doubling the number of suppliers with clean energy commitments, Apple expects to reduce carbon emissions by 18 million metric tons - the equivalent of taking over 4 million cars off the road each year, the release said.

Companies in Apple's clean energy program include 19 suppliers in the United States, 19 in Europe, 50 in China and 31 in India, Japan and South Korea, the release added.

While Apple is already carbon neutral across its global operations, by 2030, every Apple device sold will have a net-zero climate impact, according to the release.

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UK Labour Chief Starmer Tests Positive for Coronavirus - Reports

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has tested positive for coronavirus forcing him to miss out on responding to the budget and participating in the Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, media reported on Wednesday. He tested positive for COVID-19 after taking a routine lateral flow test on Wednesday, the Guardian reported, citing the Labour party.

Starmer was seen in public earlier in the day with other Labour lawmakers but has since been forced to self-isolate following COVID-19 guidance.

Former Labour leader Ed Miliband replaced Starmer in the parliament to take on Prime Minister Boris Johnson and finance minister Rishi Sunak. At the same time, Starmer tweeted his response to the budget put forward by Sunak.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, he has had to self-isolate four times, the last time was in July, after one of his children tested positive, although he had a negative result.

Johnson has already sent his sympathies to Starmer and said he hoped the Labour leader returned to the Commons soon.

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Two People Handled Loaded Gun Prior to Baldwin Shooting, Charges Possible - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Santa Fe County Sheriff Adan Mendoza said during a press conference on Wednesday that two individuals handled the loaded firearm with which actor Alec Baldwin ended up shooting dead cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounding movie director Joel Souza.

"We identified two other people that handled and or inspected the loaded firearm prior to Baldwin firing the weapon. These two individuals are armorer Hannah Reed-Gutierrez and assistant director David Halls. All three individuals have been cooperative in the investigation and have provided statements," Mendoza said.

It is too early to comment on whether charges will be filed against Baldwin, Reed-Gutierrez or Halls, Mendoza said. The investigation is ongoing and if evidence suggests that a crime took place, arrests can be made and charges filed at that time, Mendoza added.

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US Judge in Florida Grants Transferring Trump Case With Twitter to California - Filing

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge in Florida granted Twitter's request to transfer to California President Donald Trump's lawsuit seeking to restore his account on the social media platform, according to a court document.

"Twitter requests that the Court transfer this action to the Northern District of California pursuant to a forum selection clause in Twitter's Terms of Service... After careful review of the parties' arguments, the record, and relevant legal authorities, the Court grants Twitter's motion," US District Judge Robert Scola Jr. wrote in the court document.

Trump filed the lawsuit in a federal court in Florida earlier this year and argued that Twitter was coerced by members of Congress to suspend his account.

In July, Trump announced a class action lawsuit against Facebook, Twitter and Google subsidiary YouTube as well as against their CEOs. The lawsuit says the status of the three tech giants "rises beyond that of a private company to that of a state actor" and is constrained by the First Amendment right to free speech in the censorship decisions it makes regarding their users. Facebook and Twitter have insisted that their bans on Trump do not constitute censorship but were set up for public safety in response to the January 6 unrest at the US Capitol. At the time, Twitter permanently banned Trump when Trump had 88 million followers.

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US Crude Stockpiles Up Fourth Week as Imports Rise, Exports Drop - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles rose last week, resuming their uptrend for a fourth week in five, as refiners boosted imports to make more fuel products such as gasoline and diesel while exporters shipped out less raw oil, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday.

Crude stockpiles rose by 4.27 million barrels during the week to October 22, after the previous week's decline of 431,000, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed.

Analysts polled by US media had expected a rise of around 2 million barrels for the week, putting what the EIA reported at almost double to expectations.

In three weeks prior, crude inventories had risen without stop, building by a total of around 13 million barrels.

"The near 4.3 million barrel crude build in the latest week might look big, but in the grander context of what's going on, it's nothing as the US supply situation of crude is still way below the weekly need for petroleum products such as gasoline and diesel," John Kilduff, founding partner of energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

Gasoline stockpiles fell by almost 2 million barrels last week, adding to the previous week's draw of 5.37 million. Inventories of distillates, which included diesel, slipped by 432,000 barrels after a decline of 3.9 million the week prior.

The EIA data showed that crude oil imports rose by 430,000 barrels per day, or 3 million on the week, while exports fell by 273,000 barrels daily or a combined 1.9 million on the week.

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US Health Department Building in Washington Evacuated After Bomb Threat Reported

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - The headquarters of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in Washington was evacuated out of abundance of caution due to a reported bomb threat, HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Sarah Lovenheim told Sputnik.

"Out of an abundance of caution, we evacuated the building and there is no reported incident. We are monitoring the situation closely with the Federal Protective Service," Lovenheim said.

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Turkey Deploys Troops on Syrian Border to Launch Offensive Against Kurds - Reports
MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - Turkey has deployed hundreds of soldiers in northern Syria to launch an offensive against US-backed Kurdish forces, Turkish officials told Bloomberg on Wednesday.

The main goal of the planned offensive is to ensure that two-thirds of Turkey's 560-mile border with Syria is free from the presence of Kurdish forces, the officials told the news agency, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

The move by Ankara could also help the country's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan build up domestic support and put pressure on the US and Russia to pacify Kurdish forces, officials added.

Officials also noted that Ankara intends to seize areas in the south of the city of Kobani in order to unite the territories under its control to the west and east of the Euphrates River. Another potential target of the Turkish authorities could be the Menagh airfield, over which the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Syrian Kurdish Self-Defense Forces, banned in Turkey, have established power.

On October 13, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlud Cavusoglu claimed that Russia and the United States have failed to fulfill their obligations and did not clear Syria's north from Kurdish militant units. Later, on October 21, the Turkish President threatened that the country's armed forces will use heavy weapons to solve the problem and "not leave the situation as it is."

In 2016-2019, the Turkish army conducted three operations in northern Syria - "Euphrates Shield" against militants of the IS terrorist group (banned in Russia), "Olive Branch" and "Peace Spring" against Kurdish formations. Damascus has repeatedly called the presence of Turkish forces on the border territory of Syria illegal calling on Ankara to withdraw troops.

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US to Explore Development of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework With Partners - Biden

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during the East Asia Summit that the United States will explore with its partners the development of an Indo-Pacific economic framework, the White House said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Biden virtually joined leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, as well as the representatives from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and Russia during the East Asia Summit.

"President Biden ... announced that the United States will explore with partners the development of an Indo-Pacific economic framework that will define our shared objectives around trade facilitation, standards for the digital economy and technology, supply chain resiliency, decarbonization and clean energy, infrastructure, worker standards, and other areas of shared interest," the White House said in statement.

The US president also reaffirmed the United States commitment to ensuring the international rules-based order is upheld in the Indo-Pacific region.

"The President also reiterated the US commitment to the international rules-based order and expressed concern over threats to that order. He made clear that the United States will continue to stand with allies and partners in support of democracy, human rights, rule of law, and freedom of the seas," the statement said.

ASEAN was founded in 1967 and comprises ten Southeast Asian countries - Brunei, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. Since the beginning of 2021, the ASEAN rotating chairmanship has been transferred from Vietnam to Brunei.

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Turkey Joins EU Educational, Research Programs Through 2027

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - The Commission and Turkey signed three agreements granting association status to EU programs for the period 2021-2027, the European Union said on Wednesday.

Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, and Faruk Kaymakci, Turkey's Director for EU Affairs and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed Horizon Europe, the EU research and innovation programme, Erasmus+, EU programme for education, training, youth and sport and the European Solidarity Corps.

"I welcome Turkey to Horizon Europe, ERASMUS+ and the Solidarity Corps. The Turkish participation in the new generation of our EU programmes will further reinforce their capacities and support integration into the European Research Area and European Education Area,"

Commissioner Gabriel said in a statement on the EU website.

The agreements allow Turkish researchers, students, pupils, teachers, and young people get an opportunity to participate in various projects under the same conditions as participants from EU Member States.

In addition, the European Solidarity Corps is expanding the participation of youth and organizations in events as a means of promoting cohesion, solidarity, democracy by solving social and humanitarian problems.

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Any Forced Changes to Sudan Transitional Government to Put at Risk US Aid - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, October 27 (Sputnik) - Any changes to the transitional government in Sudan conducted by force will put at risk United States financial assistance to the African country, US Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills said on Wednesday. On Monday, the United States suspended \$700 million in assistance to Sudan following a military coup in which the civilian-led transitional authority members, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, were detained. Hamdok has subsequently been released. "The United States has condemned the military takeover of the transitional government in Sudan. This contravenes the Constitutional Declaration and the democratic aspirations of the Sudanese people and is utterly unacceptable," Mills told a UN Security Council meeting. "As we have said repeatedly, any changes to the transitional government by force in Khartoum put at risk US assistance."

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Gas Stations in Iran Resumed Work After Cyberattack - Oil Minister

BEIRUT, October 27 (Sputnik) - Gas stations in Iran, crippled by an alleged cyberattack on Tuesday, have resumed operations, and the incident did not lead to an increase in fuel prices in the country, Iranian Oil Minister Javad Ovjii said on Wednesday. Iranian state television reported on Tuesday that gas stations were malfunctioning across the country as a result of the cyberattack. "Operations at 3,000 gas stations in the country have resumed. We apologize to the population and promise to pay attention to similar situations in the future," the minister said, as aired on a state-run broadcaster. Ovjii assured that the "rumors" about the rise in fuel prices following the incident do not correspond to reality, adding that the Iranian government did not even consider the issue of raising prices at all. Secretary of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, Abolhassan Firouzaabadi, did not rule out that the attack was carried out from outside the country, adding that the recent attack has similarities with the one on Iran's railway company in July. Iran has repeatedly come under so-called state-sponsored cyberattacks. In July, hundreds of railway services in Iran were delayed or canceled as a result of the attack on the management systems of the state railway company, according to Iranian media. In April, the Iranian Natanz nuclear plant suffered an accident involving electricity distribution, which the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran described as "nuclear terrorism" and cyberattack carried out by Israel's foreign intelligence service.

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Republicans Who Consider 2020 US Election Unfair Show Eagerness to Vote in 2022 - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 27 (Sputnik) - Republicans who believe the 2020 US presidential election was neither free nor fair are expressing a surprising level of enthusiasm over a chance to even the score by showing up to cast ballots in midterm elections next year, a new Morning Consult poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Roughly a third (35 percent) of Republicans who distrust the US election system are extremely eager to vote in the midterms; only 19 percent of GOP [Republican] voters who trust US elections feel as enthused," a press release explaining the poll said.

Republican distrust in the integrity of the 2020 presidential election was blamed as a contributing factor to the loss of the US Senate in two Georgia runoff elections in January, raising concerns among some Republican officials about the party's work to regain control of Congress next year, the release said.

Former President Donald Trump added to those concerns with the recent claim that the party base "will not be voting" in next year midterm elections unless the Republican party addresses claims of voting fraud, the release said.

In contrast to conventional wisdom, the poll showed that election-skeptical Republicans are more likely than their comparatively trusting counterparts in planning to vote in 2022, the release added.

For example, among Republicans who say the last presidential election was fair, just over two thirds (68 percent) say they are at least somewhat enthusiastic about voting next year. By comparison, 78 percent of Republicans who consider the 2020 election unfair express similar levels of enthusiasm about voting, according to the release.

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Russia to Counter NATO's Potential Eastward Expansion - Foreign Minister

MOSCOW, October 27 (Sputnik) - Russia will do everything to resist NATO's eastward expansion amid efforts to expedite Ukraine's ascension to the alliance, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

"I believe these are very dangerous games [NATO expansion], and we will do our best to counter these kinds of trends and raise awareness among all affected countries of the dangers of such a course," Lavrov said at a joint press conference after the meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong.

The minister also added that diplomatic work is not the only measure that Russia must resort to in order to counter the Alliance's policies.

"Diplomatic work alone [to contain NATO at a distance from the borders of Russia] is not enough, it is necessary to take other measures that will be adequate to the threats posed to the security of the Russian Federation. I assure you that President Putin keeps these issues under personal control," Lavrov said.

On October 18, Lavrov announced that Moscow would suspend activities of its permanent mission to NATO from November 1 in response to the alliance's decision to expel eight members of the Russian mission to NATO in Brussels for allegedly working as intelligence officers, cutting their number to 10 in total.

In addition, starting next month, NATO military liaison mission and information offices in Moscow will be closed and the accreditation of their employees revoked.

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India Says Alarmed by China's New Boundary Law, Fears Impact on Existing Deals

NEW DELHI, October 27 (Sputnik) - India is concerned about China's adoption of a new law on land boundaries, fearing fallout for the existing bilateral agreements on border management, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said on Wednesday.

On October 23, Beijing passed the new law on land boundaries that, among other things, has provisions on carrying out reorganizations of districts in the border areas.

"In this regard, China's unilateral decision to bring about a legislation which can have implication on our existing bilateral arrangements on border management as well as on the boundary question is of concern to us," Bagchi said in a statement. "Such unilateral move will have no bearing on the arrangements that both sides have already reached earlier, whether it is on the Boundary Question or for maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC [Line of Actual Control] in India-China Border areas."

The spokesman pointed to the fact that India and China have still outstanding border issues, expressing hope that Beijing will not use the law as a pretext to "unilaterally alter the situation in the India-China border areas."

"Both sides have agreed to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution to the Boundary Question through consultations on an equal footing. We have also concluded several bilateral agreements, protocols and arrangements to maintain peace and tranquillity along the LAC in India-China border areas in the interim," the statement read.

The two Asian giants have long been at odds over disputed lands along the so-called Line of Actual Control which they have instead of a marked border. A new whirl of tensions broke out in May 2020, featuring a series of clashes between border forces that led to multiple fatalities.

In a bid to abate tensions, New Delhi and Beijing launched the disengagement consultations in early June 2020, with the first phase of disengagement on the northern and southern banks of Pangong Lake completed this February. However, the situation once again escalated in September prompting both countries to resume troop deployment near the LAC. China has since repeatedly accused India of provocations, while India has rejected all such claims as groundless.

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German Economy Minister Lowers 2021 Growth Forecast to 2.6%

BERLIN, October 27 (Sputnik) - German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said on Wednesday that the national economy was expected to expand 2.6% this year, down from 3.5% anticipated in spring.

"This prognosis is quite definitive because it's already October, and 2.6% is lower than what was predicted in spring... Next year, we expect to see a 4.1% growth," he told a press conference. Altmaier attributed the discrepancy to bottlenecks in global supply chains and soaring energy prices, which he said put a damper on national economies worldwide.

The revised economic outlook suggests that the German economy could return to the pre-pandemic levels at the end of the first quarter of 2022, three months later than originally thought, the minister explained.

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EU Court Fines Poland \$1.1Mln Daily Until Warsaw Abolishes Controversial Disciplinary Body

BRUSSELS, October 27 (Sputnik) - The European Court of Justice ordered on Wednesday that Poland pay fine worth 1 million euros (\$1.16 million) daily until it acts on its previous ruling to abolish the controversial Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court.

The European Union has criticized Poland for several judicial reforms — including the formation of a disciplinary chamber with the Polish Supreme Court eligible to remove judges from their posts — which it considered infringing upon the independence of the Polish judiciary. In July, the EU court requested Poland to scrap the controversial body, which Warsaw refused to do, insisting that its national constitution takes precedence over EU law.

"As it has not suspended the application of the provisions of national legislation relating, in particular, to the areas of jurisdiction of the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court, Poland is ordered to pay the European Commission a daily penalty payment in an amount of €1 000 000," the court ruling read.

Commenting on the court verdict, Polish Deputy Justice Minister Sebastian Kaleta denounced it as "usurpation and blackmail."

"The EU court is completely ignoring the Polish constitution and the decisions of the Constitutional Tribunal. It operates outside its competences and abuses the imposition of financial penalties and interim measures," the official tweeted.

Earlier in October, however, Poland agreed to implement the verdict after Brussels instructed relevant EU services to look into the legitimacy of Warsaw's move, warning of sanctions.

Despite that, the European Commission suggests that Poland failed to fully implement the court decision and continue to take actions that may threaten the independence and impartiality of judges. As a result, the EU body asked the court of justice to introduce financial sanctions against Warsaw.